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COVER: *Lancelot and Guinevere*, by Donato Giancola. RIGHT: *The Maiden and the Unicorn*, by Scott Gustafson. See gallery on page 64. BELOW: Kristianna Loken in *Bloodrayne*. BOTTOM: James Franco stars in 20th Century Fox's upcoming *Tristan and Isolde*.

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ALLEN DOUGLAS *(left)* received a BFA in illustration from Syracuse University and has been working as a freelance illustrator ever since. After spending eight years in New York City, his studio is now located back in his hometown of Rochester, NY, on the southern shores of Lake Ontario. On his drawing board these days are book covers and historical paintings for children's history books. He currently teaches at the Rochester Institute of Technology and is a member of the Association of Science-Fiction & Fantasy Artists and the Society of Illustrators in New York.

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CHRIS COCOZZA *(right)* has been illustrating for over 15 years. He style portrays a realistic conceptual collage that depicts many of the issues confronting society and culture today. The ideas glide effortlessly from one to another visually. His work easily transforms the viewer to new and fantastic realms. He is a member of the Society of Illustrators in NYC. See more of his work at www.theispot.com/cocozza, www.blackbook.com/cocozza, or www.altpick.com/cocozza.

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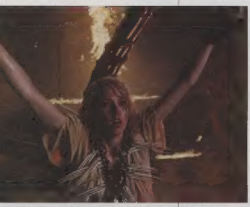
DEALER INQUIRES WELCOME!

By Resa Nelson

Peter Jackson returns to the big screen in a very big way.

One of the most anticipated movies of the year was released by Universal on December 14: ***King Kong***, which is Peter Jackson's first film since the *Lord of the Rings*. The Oscar-winning team of Jackson, Fran Walsh, and Philippa Boyens reunited to write and produce King Kong, shot in New Zealand and aided by visual effects from Weta Digital and Weta Workshop.

Just as Andy Serkis suited up to have his actions digitally transformed onscreen to create the character of Golum in *Lord of the Rings*, he suited up again to provide the computer model for King Kong himself.



ABOVE: Naomi Watts stars as Ann Darrow. RIGHT: Jackson has again paired up with WETA Digital and WETA Workshop for Kong's special effects.

Not counting Japanese movies, Jackson's remake is the fourth *Kong* movie. The original *King Kong* was based on a story by Merian C. Cooper and Edgar Wallace. Made into an RKO Radio Pictures film in 1933, it was directed by real-life adventurers Cooper and Ernest B. Schoesdack. The National Film Registry has designated the 1933 *King Kong* as one of the 100 Greatest Films and has been permanently preserved as a national treasure.

The story unfolds as American adventurers in the 1930s land on an unknown island, which turns out to be a land of the lost. Dinosaurs roam the island, but the greatest discovery is a giant great ape—King Kong. The Americans capture him and take him back to Great Depression-era New York, where they exhibit him as the world's eighth greatest wonder. But Kong falls in love with a woman, escapes and climbs the Empire State Building, only to be shot down by planes. At its heart, *King Kong* is a retelling of Beauty and the Beast. The 1933 version made its beauty, Fay Wray, a star.

In 1976 it was Jessica Lange who starred in her first role as the beauty. Critics panned the remake, which also starred Jeff Bridges and Charles Grodin, but it succeeded in launching Lange's career.

Ten years later, Dino De Laurentis attempted a sequel, *King Kong Lives*. Linda Hamilton stars in a story that sets King Kong up with a mate his own species and size, but the Army tries to kill them both.

So what odds does Jackson's version stand to succeed where others have failed? Considering his painstaking and detailed work on *Lord of the Rings*, the odds seem mighty good.

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you mess with all of me.

First Jackson's cast is solid. Naomi Watts (*The Ring*) plays Ann Darrow, destined to become Kong's love interest. Jack Black (*The School of Rock*) is bound to bring in plenty of comic relief, while Oscar winner Adrien Brody (*The Village, The Pianist*) is likely to ground the story in believability.

Jackson has expanded the story to give more time to Kong's home on Skull Island, which promises to be an exotic sight. He also re-created 1930s New York on a New Zealand set, complete with Broadway, Times Square, and Macy's. Combining the set with miniatures and a digital computer model of New York promises to bring the era to vivid life. Filming the live action required over 100 days, but shooting the miniatures took twice as long. If anyone can revamp a treasured classic like *King Kong*, Jackson's a solid bet.

One of winter's most promising movies is ***Bloodrayne***, scheduled for release on January 6 from Herold Productions, Brightlight Pictures, and Boll KG. *Bloodrayne* joins the steadily growing trend of video game franchises translated into feature films. During the past decade or so, theater attendance has dropped sharply, partly due to the fact that many people would rather stay home and play video games. In a nutshell, teens haven't been giving up their video games when they grow up. Instead, long-time gamers are entering their 20s and 30s with no signs of slowing down their joysticks.

The *Bloodrayne* video games center around Rayne, who is a Dhampir, a half-breed resulting from her human mother's rape by her vampire father. Rayne takes it upon herself to seek vengeance upon her father and all other vampires. She has inherited the superhuman strength, agility, and senses of vampires while maintaining most of her humanity. Being a Dhampir means Rayne gets to have her cake and eat it too—she has the strengths of a vampire but none of the weaknesses.

Except for an unquenchable thirst for blood and an aversion to sunlight.

Director and producer Uwe Boll is making a career of directing video-game movies. His previous films (*House of the Dead, Alone in the Dark*) are based on games, as is his next project—*Hunter: The Reckoning*. Boll says that his greatest challenge in bringing *Bloodrayne* to life was staying true to the characters and game elements.

Jack Black (right) stars as Carl Denham, the showman who captures the giant ape.

...test in cinematic special effects.

Two major changes to the story are the time and setting. In the video game, Rayne lives in 1930s Germany and fights vampire Nazis. The movie takes place in 1723 Transylvania. Boll chose to shoot on location in Romania and the Transylvanian Alps, including Bran Castle, also known as Castle Dracula.

"It was not easy to work with a Romanian crew in the real Transylvania," Boll says. "The logistics and the food in the mountains are not perfect. There were days I ate only Snickers."

The story of *Bloodrayne* is a battle between good and evil where the prize is humankind. Lord Kagan (played by Ben Kingsley of *The House of Sand and Fog*) is a ruler so powerful that no one dares to cross him. Even though he's a vampire, Kagan craves even more power and jumps at the opportunity to become invincible when he learns of three secret treasures. If he can find and unite these treasures, Kagan will become immortal.

The only thing that stands in his way is a small organization known as the Brimstone Society, a group made up of men and women committed to watching over each other while avenging the weak. The Brimstone Society believes it's possible to restore law and order to a world that's being crushed under Kagan's thumb.

The Brimstone Society has heard the legend of a mysterious woman who knows the secret to defeating Lord Kagan once and for all. They strive to find her, all the while wondering if she'll be willing to help them or turn her back on them in order to walk her own path.

"I wanted to make a movie that has many elements of what we like most about movies," Bolls says. "Movies are an opportunity to go somewhere you've never been. There is something romantic and yet noble about the time of swords and legendary battles. And yet there is the mythical side of possibility that appeals to our imagination.

"The reason we are fascinated with vampires is because they are mythical creatures. They are immortal, but they are also dangerous. So I decided I would take the era of swordplay, blend it with the mythical dangers and evils of a potential vampire sub-culture, and throw it all into an epic adventure that thrills us, excites us, and keeps us living in the adventure."

About the story, Boll says, "Kagan is the big vampire leader taking over the world. The Brimstone Society are the vampire hunters but they are getting weaker and weaker. It is only with Rayne's help that they have a chance to fight against Kagan."

The movie sports an all-star cast. Kristanna Loken (*Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*) plays Rayne, and she's joined by Billy Zane (*Titanic*), Michael Madsen (*Kill Bill*), and Meat Loaf (*Fight Club*). Michelle Rodriguez (*Blue Crush*), Will Sanderson (*Alone in the Dark*), and Matt Davis (*Legally Blonde*) play vampire hunters. And then there's Oscar-winner Kingsley. How did Boll land such a stellar cast?

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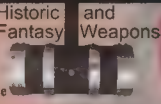

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"[Kingsley] always wanted to play a vampire" Boll says "He is a perfect actor and gentleman. Always perfectly prepared."

The *Bloodrayne* video franchise became so popular that in 2004 the Dhampir became the first video character to be featured not only in a Playboy spread but on its cover. But can her popularity cross over to film? The movie itself is being promoted as a cross-genre blend that is not your typical vampire movie

"There is action," Boll promises. "There is romance. There is adventure, and there are the characters of nobility, immortality, and danger. I think this will cross many genres and attract a very large audience.

"It is a classical bloody, sexy vampire movie shot on original locations. It is very rough and disturbing, without all this CGI from *Electra* or *Catwoman*."

In the past few years, Hollywood has discovered two hot spots during the year for horror movies: October and February. At press time, Dimension Films is poised to get a jumpstart on the winter horror season by releasing ***Feast*** on January 20.

Feast has a classic haunted-house storyline: there's a bar in the middle of nowhere. Suddenly, the people inside find themselves under attack from a new kind of creature. The monsters struggle to invade the bar, and everyone inside struggles to keep them out. As the monsters find new and creative ways to attack, they slowly pick off the folks in the bar. Will anyone survive?

Feast is the first horror film produced by Project Greenlight, a screenplay contest that's the brainchild of actors Ben Affleck and Matt Damon, dreamed up after they won the Oscar for Best Screenplay for *Good Will Hunting*. In its first two years, the contest made mainstream films that bombed. In an effort to make a movie worth the million-dollar investment, Project Greenlight's new goal was to make a genre film: comedy, science fiction, or horror.

Enter Wes Craven as producer. When the contest narrowed the field down to a few screenplays, *Feast* was the winner—although it wasn't a hands-down choice. The next step was to choose a director from the pool of contestants, and John Gulager (son of actor Clu Gulager) won the bid.

"It's a darn simple basic plot," say Patrick Melton, who co-wrote the script with Marcus Dunstan. "It takes place in a desolate bar. Out of the blue, very quickly, they're inundated by this onslaught of flesh eating beasts.

"We try to play with the clichés of these types of movies. You have the military guy who just came home and can't wait to see his family, but now he has to lead this group to safety. But we flip the archetypes.

"It's a creature feature. It sort of harkens back to the day of the creature of the week. Ironically, it's done with a higher budget than they ever had.

Melton and Dunstan both attended Iowa University, although they weren't members of the famed Iowa Writers Workshop.

"Although I did work several catering events where there were some Iowa Writers Workshop people," Melton notes wryly. "There's not much to do there except drink beer and write."

At the age of 21, Melton moved out to Los Angeles, and Dunstan followed a year later. Their goal was to work toward the goal of becoming screenwriters. Before Project Greenlight, Melton worked as a story analyst for a talent agency. That experience played a major role in how he approached writing *Feast*.

"I've done story analysis for over a thousand scripts," Melton says. "I've seen what everyone does. It's a genre that's well worn. We're going to flip it."

Melton cites last year's *Cursed* as an example of what he strives not to do. "It's a werewolf movie. A movie that was made more than 20 years ago by John Landis, called *American Werewolf in London*, is superior to *Cursed* in terms of how the werewolf looks, the scares, the effects, and everything. Landis didn't have CGI. He took creative angles in terms of how much of the beast to show, and it looked great. It's a much better movie.

"You see it, too, with *Star Wars*. The original cost was ten times less and it was a better movie. When there are (CGI) animals or humans, they lack a certain weight. It doesn't seem quite right. In *Star Wars*, there's Chewbacca: you can see him, you can touch him.

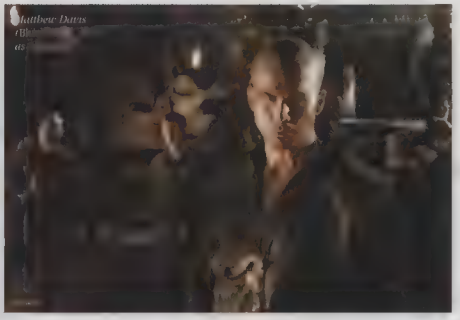
"We had to do that. We had to be creative and figure out how to do it. How to get the biggest bang for the buck. Luckily, John has a real good eye for that. In a horror movie, your mind's doing a lot of the work. Often that is most effective."

Melton reflects on the fact that sometimes when a task is forced upon you, the result is that you end up tapping into a different level of creativity and producing better work. In fact the solution is usually more inventive than the original concept. "You pound your fist for a few minutes and start thinking on it a little bit and finally get excited about something. Instead of just going with what you like, you're more creative and you think within the ability of the production."

Although *Feast* originally had a budget of $1 million, that budget essentially doubled when Skywalker Sound liked *Feast* so much that they volunteered to do the sound for the movie.

"Sound is so important," Melton says. "It makes a movie like *Cabin Fever*, which is a really mediocre movie, quite good. There are moments that really aren't scary, but with the sound, boy, they really do make it scary."

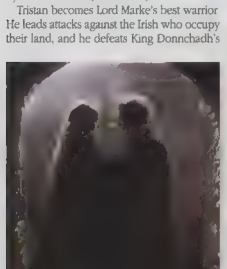
In regard to the folks at Project Greenlight, Melton says, "Not only do they want to make money, but they actually like *Feast* and they think it can make money. It's in a genre with a very loyal following, but it's different



"Hopefully, it's still able to connect with an audience Some people have seen it, and they're expecting *Jason vs. Freddie*, and it's just not that at all. If you saw and liked *Evil Dead* or *Dead Alive*, you'll get it right away."

Following in the footsteps of *King Arthur* and *Kingdom of Heaven*, ***Tristan and Isolde*** (due for release on February 3 from 20th Century Fox) brings the medieval world to life with a screenplay based on an ancient legend Set after the fall of the Roman Empire, Tristan (played by James Franco of TV's *James Dean*) is an orphan raised by a family friend, Lord Marke (played by Rufus Sewell of *A Knight's Tale*). They live in England, a tribal country which soon finds itself under the thumb of Ireland's King Donnchadh, played by David O'Hara (*Braveheart*)

Tristan becomes Lord Marke's best warrior He leads attacks against the Irish who occupy their land, and he defeats King Donnchadh's



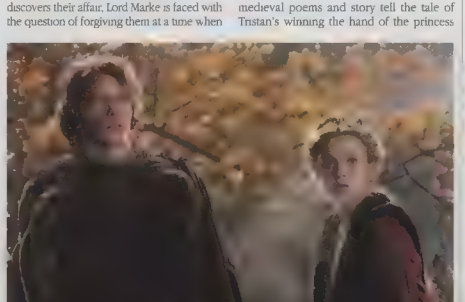
best fighters in their own territory However, when Tristan is wounded while in Ireland, the severity of his injury convinces Tristan he's going to die. He gives up and sends for a funeral boat

By the time the funeral boat arrives, an Irish princess, Isolde (played by Sophia Myles of *Thunderbirds*), has discovered Tristan and they quickly fall in love However, it soon becomes necessary for Tristan to find his way back to England for his own safety.

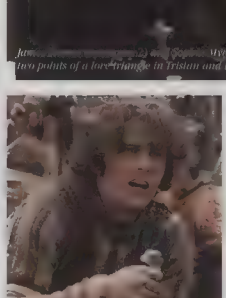
Meanwhile, King Donnchadh is determined to defeat the English. If he can't beat them on the battlefield, he'll conquer them from within Realizing that there's turmoil among the English lords, King Donnchadh takes action to cause even more strife by inviting them to compete for the hand of Princess Isolde

Lord Marke takes King Donnchadh up on his offer by sending Tristan to fight as his champion. Tristan knows he's competing to win a bride for Lord Marke, but he has no idea that the woman in question is the one with whom he's already fallen in love When Tristan wins, King Donnchadh's plan backfires, because England ultimately unites when Lord Marke marries Isolde and prepares to become the king of England. At the same time, Tristan and Isolde are devastated

Despite their best efforts, they become lovers again, betraying Lord Marke. When he discovers their affair, Lord Marke is faced with the question of forgiving them at a time when



James [illegible] Sophia Myles (seen here) are two points of a love triangle in Tristan and Isolde.



the Irish are preparing to attack his castle and he's in need of Tristan's help

"It's a Celtic myth, which we have done a pretty loose adaptation of," director Kevin Reynolds told *Empire* magazine "It's a beautiful tragedy that's Romeo and Juliet-esque in the way it unfolds."

The myth was adapted by French poets Thomas and Beroul in the late 1100s, then by an unknown author as the *Prose Tristan* in 1240, which influenced Sir Thomas Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* in 1469. Some scholars speculate that the legend is based on a real story of a Pictish prince in 780 who saved a princess from pirates The medieval poems and story tell the tale of Tristan's winning the hand of the princess Isolde for his uncle, King Mark, only to fall in love with her himself when the two unwittingly drink a love potion that was made by Isolde's mother and intended for Isolde and her new husband. It's a story that includes a dragon slain by Tristan, a snooping dwarf magician, and a defeated giant who befriends Tristan

Tristan and Isolde has no magical or fantasy elements Instead, it promises to be a modern interpretation of an ancient legend The movie is rumored to be a long-time dream project of executive producers Ridley Scott (*Gladiator, Kingdom of Heaven*) and Tony Scott (*Enemy of the State*), shot on location in Ireland and Prague

"The world we are creating is one that is very obscure in terms of documentation," executive producer Jim Lemley told *Screen International*. "There is very little that tells you what it must have been like to live at that time because it was after the Roman Empire had receded Ridley has been unbelievably supportive and enthusiastic as executive producer and he has been our creative force."

Ridley Scott sent the script to Reynolds six years ago, but the project was put on hold in order to put the finances together

"I was honored he sent it to me," Reynolds told *Screen International* "This is a great script, and it's an exciting challenge to realize it effectively on the screen." ❧

III
ULTIMATE GOAL
Shape the face of the new world
TEEN
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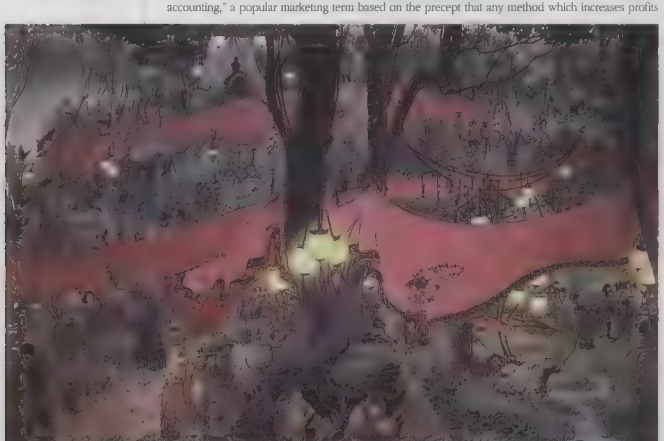
IMMEDIATE GOAL

Make it through the next ten minutes

by Helen Pilinovsky

Goblin markets are the magical marketplaces of fantasy literature.

The term "market" as an image has expanded from the ideal of rustic buyers wandering past thatched cottages. Now, the term is as likely to bring to mind bond traders as it is rural vendors. But the *Goblin* Market represents a slightly different ideal. It, too, has changed from its original image of goblin men offering temptation by the road in the form of enchanted fruit. It now encompasses the strange little shops and enchanted thoroughfares. Though its magic is eternal, regardless of whether it is proffered by breech-clad boggles or Vivienne Westwood-wearing wizards, the market's most recent incarnations in fantasy literature reflect a new view of magic—one which takes into account issues of industrialization and globalization, of societal change in the arenas of finance and interaction. "Voodoo accounting," a popular marketing term based on the precept that any method which increases profits through trickery will eventually catch up with the offending party (causing their profits to vanish like fairy gold) draws upon many of the commonly held assumptions that associate magic with trickery and lies. Such is not the case, however, in the goblin market or its many, many offshoots, where magic is not only the means to an end but also often its own reward. From Christina Rossetti's usage of the trope in her 1862 poem *Goblin Market*, through the adaptation of the idea of magic as a commodifiable good in the myriad stories of magic stores in Golden Age science fiction and fantasy, and into its usage in (post)modern day urban fantasies and fairy tale retellings, the goblin market has represented a melding of magic and mortal ingenuity. In this Folkroots column, we will explore the changing tropes of the goblin market through the present day, and the normalization of the "exchange rate" between magic and mundanity.



Charles Vess's Fairy Market *illustration can be found in the book* Stardust.

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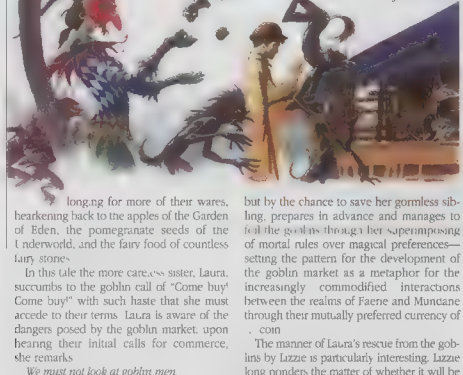
Opening the Goblin Market

The first incarnation of the goblin market, Christina Rossetti's poem of the same title, is on its surface a tale of two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, who encounter a troop of sinister supra natural merchants whose wares carry temptation and, potentially, damnation. The goblins offer delectable fruits—

Apples and quinces
Lemons and oranges
grapes fresh from the vine
Pomegranates full and fine

which, once consumed, leave the "customer" with an unassuageable



The Night Time Fair
by Charles Vess

longing for more of their wares, hearkening back to the apples of the Garden of Eden, the pomegranate seeds of the Underworld, and the fairy food of countless fairy stories.

In this tale the more careless sister, Laura, succumbs to the goblin call of "Come buy! Come buy!" with such haste that she must accede to their terms. Laura is aware of the dangers posed by the goblin market upon hearing their initial calls for commerce, she remarks

We must not look at goblin men
We must not buy their fruits.
Who knows upon what soil they feed their
hungry thirsty roots?

But curious, impetuous Laura lingers to listen longer to the cries of the goblins (while the cautious Lizzie flees) and finds herself thoroughly tempted. She resists at first, aware that by her own standards she has no acceptable currency.

Laura stared but did not stir,
Long'd but had no money.

Later in her own words she says

Good folk, I have no coin;
To take were to purloin.
I have no copper in my purse,
I have no silver either,
And all my gold is on the furze
That shakes in windy weather
Above the rusty heather.

But she eventually accepts the goblin bargain to trade a lock of her golden hair when they offer to barter. According to the magical Law of Contagnation, which states that any part of a thing is equivalent to the entirety, Laura has given them herself; in exchange, she has taken their corruption into herself. The consequences of that action—her "addiction" to and subsequent "withdrawal" from the fairy fruit—can be attributed to both her ignorance of the dangers of the wares in question, and her proportionate disregard for the rules of the marketplace as they apply to her.

It appears, as well, that she knows what she has done. After clipping off a lock of her hair, we read how she "dropped a tear more rare than pearl," signaling her knowledge of her doom. In marked contrast, her wiser sister Lizzie, who is tempted not by the fruit but by the chance to save her gormless sibling, prepares in advance and manages to foil the goblins through her superimposing of mortal rules over magical preferences—setting the pattern for the development of the goblin market as a metaphor for the increasingly commodified interactions between the realms of Faerie and Mundane through their mutually preferred currency of . . . coin.

The manner of Laura's rescue from the goblins by Lizzie is particularly interesting. Lizzie long ponders the matter of whether it will be possible to cure her sister by other means, as well as the question of the price that she will have to pay; we read that Lizzie longs

to buy fruit to comfort her,
but feared to pay too dear.

until finally, as Laura fades further still,

Lizzie weighed no more
Better and worse, but put a silver penny in
her purse.
Kissed Laura, crossed the heath with clumps
of furze
At twilight, hailed by the brook:
And for the first time in her life
Began to listen and to look.

This sequence of events which underscores the care and forethought behind her plan.

Lizzie goes to buy fruit for her sister, but offers no more than mortal coin, the goblins receive it, not of their own volition, but when she tosses it at them casually. This is not their preferred payment, they wish to gain her company, and herself, but she refuses. Nevertheless, they have accepted payment, which they do not return when she says

If you will not sell me any
Of your fruits though much and many
Give me back my silver penny
I tossed you for a fee

The deal has been struck, and sealed with silver. By ancient rules of Faerie, of which Rossetti appears aware, the goblins must attempt to fulfill their bargain, they "give" Lizzie the fruit by violently attacking her with it in their fury at her refusal. But Lizzie will not accept their conditions, and they cannot force her to acquiesce under conditions that she had not agreed to. The goblins return her penny and storm off after their attack without having gained any advantage over her, allowing Lizzie to carry the fruits of their rage (or, pulped droppings, as the case may be) back to her sister as an antidote to the original poison, transmogrified by her sacrifice from poison to anodyne. The goblins attempted to fulfill the bargain on their terms, by forcing the goods upon her that she had inquired about and paid for in advance. When she would not allow it, they refused to fulfill the bargain on her terms by simply giving her the fruit to carry off, knowing that they would not gain her "spirit" in that way. Thus, matters might have concluded with a draw; except, by breaking the rules of the marketplace by using physical force, they granted Lizzie what she wanted all along: the means to rescue her sister from their coils. Simply put, Lizzie triumphed by knowing the rules of the market place.

Grounds of the Goblin Market

Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" is dated 1859, was first published in 1862, and is thought to have been partially inspired by earlier fairy poems, as the subject gained steadily in popularity throughout the Victorian period. Notably, her original title for the poem was "A Peep at the Goblins," alluding to a popular poem, "A Peep at the Pixies," written by Eliza Bray in 1854, the title that we know was suggested by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the course of his illustrating the text. The themes of the two works possess significant parallels; "A Peep at the Pixies" concerns the tale of a young woman who chances to hear fairy music, and pines for it thereafter. Rossetti is also thought to have been inspired by the Reverend Bray's fairy tale "The Rural Sisters" (1859) and "The Pixies" (1857) by Archibald Maclaren. However, earlier Victorian pieces were far more restrained in their treatments of the parallels between the older customs of folklore and modern life; Rossetti, in marked contrast, appears to have coupled an extensive knowledge of folkloric convention with the conscious aim of addressing societal concerns. Rossetti's innovation in using the traditional structure of folklore to add depth to a contemporary moral message represented a new idea for the Victorians, as she was one of the first authors of that time to treat the fairy

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Dream Weaver

tale form, largely scorned as childlike, as a medium to explore concerns about topics touching adult society

It is interesting to note that this poem is the first important piece of fantasy to use the market as its primary setting, reflecting the growing commodification of Victorian culture resulting from the Industrial Revolution, and extending even to the commodification of personal interaction Older tales frequently discuss journeys *into* fairy realms, by minstrels, mortal lovers and maidens This blended realm of the market is a new thing, representative of the temptations that had made their way into the Victorian world—temptations that ran the gamut from narcotics to the loosening strictures of sexuality—to create a liminal space, a tenuous boundary between what had been proper in the past, and what would be proper in the future The liminal space of the market is an intensification of the pre-existing nature of Faerie as a land of borders, as is reflected in Rossetti's use of traditional conventions such as the facts that the girls can apparently only interact with the goblins at dusk and dawn—intermediate times that are neither night nor day—and in their increased vulnerability on the bank of the river and the road, which are places that imply travel and change

Many older folktales are set in *human* markets, where those who had *already* been touched by Faerie in some way could discern the true nature of the Other in their midst In these tales, mortals were typically paid for performing some favor for a fairy with the ability to see their *kind*—but when other fairies discovered the mortal's ability to interact with them (most often in the circumstances of broad social exchange represented by the market), the consequences were rarely positive In these old folktales, there tends to be a clear demarcation between Them and Us In Rossetti's "Goblin Market", however, mortals previously untouched by magic are fully susceptible to the lures of the goblins, the seeds of their own destruction germinating within them. The older rules of magic that separated the Mundane from the Fantastic no longer protect them. Now, they must rely solely on human traits of will, and on the rules of the market place itself In stories of this type, beginning with "Goblin Market" and continuing through the later tales using this trope, always, there is some "unlawful" behavior and the enactment of strict regulation by what authorities there be to bring matters back into balance.

Fundamentally, the market represents both economic and social transgression—or, rather, the amalgamation of the two by a society that came to see money as being equivalent to honor and power. Social transgression came to be expressed through economic means Thus, all of those instances of mortals buying goods unintended for their hands (as in Rossetti's "Goblin Market"), or of stealing them, cheating others, and breaking contracts (as in subsequent fantasy tales), become newly significant of their transgressions against the norms of society, and doubly significant because of their occurrence in the borderland of the market—a place where the rules must be *more* strictly observed, rather than less, so as to maintain the borders between the permissible and the forbidden

The only question is, whose rules? Those of the magic realm, or those of the mortal world? Moving from the fairy markets of traditional folk tales to the goblin market of Rossetti's poem, we see a systematic change from the barter economy where the "exchange rate" favored magic as a greater market force to the *regulation* of magic through established social and fiduciary conventions, reflecting the overall normalization of society from the Industrial Revolution onwards Modern literature shows a sweeping progression towards a system which operates equally on the rules of both worlds while retaining its liminal nature Many are the works which could stand to be described along this path: those roughly contemporaneous with Rossetti's poem, those works of modern values set in modern times prior to our own, such as the Odde Shoppe stories from the Golden Age of science fiction, those works written in our own time, but set in the past, such as Jack Vance's *Lyonesse* series or Neil Gaiman's *Stardust*, and finally, those both written and set in the present, such as Holly Black's *Valiant* and Delia Sherman's *Changeling*

The Era of the Odde Shoppe

With the coming of the Industrial Revolution, and the slow fading of the cries of itinerant vendors calling upon passers-by to "Come buy! Come buy!", stories changed to reflect the resulting social adaptations: magic was still a highly desirable commodity, but its marketing became as much a matter of modernity as that of any other stock. In his introduction to *Magic for Sale* (1983), an anthology of (as he termed them) Odde Shoppes, Avram Davidson wrote "So why the odd little shop story? What is there to explain? It is archetypal and primordial Instead of the little house in the forest we have the little shop in the city, the proprietor or proprietrix is the wise old woman or wise old man Perhaps we can say the shop is the cave of the womb, one desires what is there-in but one is at the same time fearful, it is dark, it is cluttered and close, it contains wonders, it contains perils, it is the way to the quest.. " Davidson certainly hit upon an important element in the popularity of the sub-genre, but the reasoning goes a bit deeper then it would initially appear Not only is the Odde Shoppe acting as a stand-in for the encounter at the cross roads with the enchanter-figure who may help or harm depending upon his or her inclination, but the act of purchasing is standing in for the quest, replacing adventure with acquisition In the modern mindset, are the two truly analogous? They are not Though the nature of

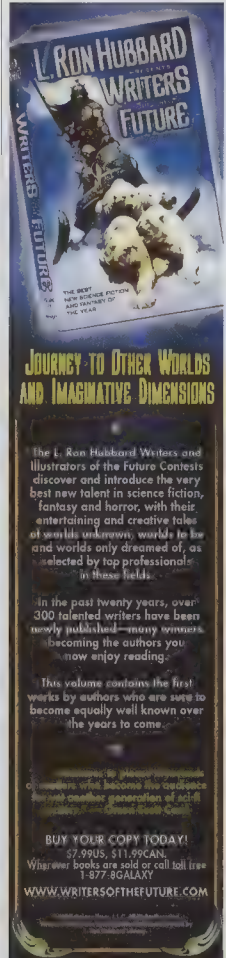
the market is such that it acts as a natural liminal zone (with its potential for change stemming from the process of goods changing hands, and those goods affecting their buyers), the quest itself remains intact. The focus of the shift lies not in the notion that the human drive for adventure has changed, but that those adventures now take place in an environment which has evolved to possess predators who are equally as likely to try to sell Little Red Riding Hood a better basket to carry before her journey as they are to waylay her along it.

Though the odd shop is slightly more stable by nature than the goblin market, its magical nature assures that it will never be tied to the infrastructure around it. In such stories, odd shops are not considered to be stable emporia, as can be seen in Terry Carr's "Touchstone" (1964) when one character asks, "If I come back here a week from now... will this store still be here? Or will it have disappeared, like magic shops are supposed to?" The magic shop retains its essence of impermanence; just as Christina Rossetti's Laura was unable return to the goblin market to purchase more of the fruit that could satisfy her, so the customers of the typical magic shop are unable to register their complaints, should they have any. The change is one of degree, and not of kind. In another tale of magical sales, Robert Silverberg's "As Is" (1968), a man who's been sold a faulty bill of goods (a magical car belonging to a supranatural businessman who'd like its return) is recompensed by a business contract. He happens to sell computers, and his wizardly customer says: "I've been considering computerizing our operation too, you know? It's a pretty big outfit, a lot of consulting stuff all over the world, mostly dowsing now, some thaumaturgy, now and then a little transmutation, things like that, and though we use traditional methods, we don't object to the scientific approach. . " That lack of objection to the idea of cosmetic upgrades to the nature of the market lies at the heart of the continuing relevance of the goblin market in modern literature- though the trappings may change, and the transactions become somewhat more central to the stories, the core of the market remains the same

An illustration by Christina Rossetti's brother, Dante, from Goblin Market and Other Poems

Vintage Shopping: Anachronous Markets

Though the ideas of the market itself obviously change with the passage of years, the fashion in fantasy is frequently for the archaic, the anachronistic, and the timeless presenting readers with myriad choices amongst old styled versions of the goblin market. In one such treatment of the concept of the market, Jack Vance presents readers with the King of the Faenes, Rhodion, who loves markets so much that he's happy to attend the mortal versions in a pinch, as well as with a bona fide Goblin Fair. Gathering thrice yearly, the Goblin Faires are described in *The Green Pearl* (1985) as occasions which draw "traders and buyers from all across the Elder Isles, human and halfling alike, each hoping to discover some wonderful charm or trinket or elixir to bring advantages to his life or gold to his wallet. . with folk of many sorts who had come to mingle in unconventional camaraderie, to sell, to buy, to trade, or only to watch and listen, or perhaps to seek out some long-lost friend, or some deluded enemy, or to recover an item of which they had been deprived the yearnings were as disparate as the folk themselves " The one common element of all of the reasons listed lies in a desire for change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of which the market is both an offshoot and a catalyst

In a slightly later reading of the goblin market, Rosemary Edgehill introduces us to what she initially calls "The Unfair Faire Affair" in *The Cup of Morning Shadows* (1995) when her human heroine must traverse half of Faerie in order to find her elven lover. Highlighting its liminal nature, the market is described as "the place to go ... [if] crossing Borders is what you're after" and as "one of the most dangerous places in all the lands." Edgehill's writing carries a characteristic humor, but her market is no laughing matter: it is the fulcrum of the enchanted lands, an inevitable destination for any regular traveler. Edgehill specifies that "Every road out of [its] valley led to a different land. No road led to the same destination twice. Even experienced travelers, when caught in the goblin market's turbulence, let its power fling them where it would..." Her market is a blended place as a result, its denizens composed of everything from characters from other authors' books (a device she explores more fully in a later volume of the series) to 14th-century noblewomen and one lost New Yorker. Ruth Marlowe's character possesses a distinctly troubled past: previously, the hapless heroine had had her soul sundered to discomfit her lover, only to lose him during a journey back to Faerie. Still, heart-sore and half-whole, Ruth's visit to the goblin market is of particular importance given the fact (unbeknownst to her) that the rules of commerce there were simple: you could only sell what you wanted to keep, and purchase what you already owned." When a passing junkman offers her a choice of any two objects from his tray in fair trade for the iron knife at her belt, Ruth only accepts out of idleness, little knowing that the embroidery scissors and the silken cord that she chooses at random will undo her bonds at the conclusion of her adventure. The goblin market offers its visitors both what they *want*, and what they need—the former typically to their undoing, and the latter more often to their benefit: the fact of the frequency of confusion as to which is which is another sign of the market's function as a balancing point between fiction and fact, illusion and reality.

Some of the most compelling images of the market have come from the pen of Neil Gaiman and the brushes of Charles Vess: their presentations of the market center on the similar element of it allowing one to find one's heart's desire. In one interpretation from *The Books of Magic* (1990), young Tim is offered just that on his first visit into Faerie in trade for a year of his life, his voice, or the color of his eyes. When his guide refuses on his behalf, the tradeswoman proffers a "gift" of berry-juice for his travels, only to be rebuffed again with the rejoinder that he has no time to dally in the Faerie, indicating that the ancient conventions of Rossetti and her predecessors are still functioning in full force. Tim is allowed, however, to accept the woman's good wishes, wishes which might in fact be responsible in some wise for foiling of a disreputable market-denizen's plot to press him into service by framing him for theft. Instead, Tim and his companions are all allowed to choose reparation from amidst his possessions, objects which prove to be enormously useful in the trajectory of the tale. The idea of the market as an endless repository of *deus ex machina* has become so commonly accepted that Dianna Wynne Jones mocked it openly in her *Tough Guide to Fantasyland* (1996), but the results should not be so much associated with the goods themselves, necessarily, as with their place of origin, as the duo's later collaboration in the illustrated novel *Stardust* (1997) indicates.

Although the market at Wall in *Stardust* is never directly referred to as a goblin market, no more than the Odde Shoppes are referred to as their settled outposts, it is clearly descended from it. Coming to the meadow just beyond the border between Faerie and a modern world in which a young Victoria reigns every nine years, the market carries goods of every sort, including not only the ubiquitous

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enchanted produce, but also everything from new eyes to bespelled flowers of glass. It is a place where one can find one's heart's desire, as indeed first Dustan Thorne and his son Tristan do, though in very different ways. Dustan Thorne is granted his heart's desire by a foreign lodger at the market who offers him a princely sum for lodging in his home for the length of the market. Despite his largesse Dunstan hesitates, noting that "If you're here for the market then it's miracles and wonders you'll be trading ," a shy suggestion to which the stranger acquiesces, promising him his heart's desire, and later commenting that "my gifts last a long time. You and your firstborn child and its first born child…." It's a promise and a prophecy spoken all at once as a result of the market's appearance, and it proves true in the most unexpected of fashions.

While shopping for a present for his lady love Dunstan comes across a stall in the market selling objects such as storm filled eggshells and objects beyond his means, such as delicate, beauteous glass flowers, picked from the slopes of a mountain in Faerie. But the proprietor proves more enchanting than her wares, and thus Dunstan finds his heart's desire. Interestingly, though this marketwoman observes the same rules as the original goblins of Rossetti's poem, refusing coin in favor of such intangibles as the color of his hair or his memory of youth (settling finally for a single kiss upon her cheek) this does not contravene the "rules" of the goblin market as they are perceived in modernity. Instead, the incident serves as an example of how compromise can prove possible in the face of a common goal. Dunstan, in fact, gains not only his heart's desire, but also an additional consequence when his infant son is delivered to the gate between Faerie and Wall nine months after the departure of the market, and three months after his marriage to his lady-love. That son, Tristan Thorn, is raised in ignorance of his heritage, barred from the one egress into Faerie offered by the market until he is sent off on a quest to find a falling star in order to gain what he thinks is his heart's desire the hand of a young townswoman amused by his grandiose promises of love. However, Tristan's travails in Faerie demonstrate the possibility of broader horizons to his dreams and desires alike, culminating in his entry to the market, where his father's former lodger, unobserved, notes his realization of his *true* desire for the star Yvaine with only a wry "Which is all the thanks I'll ever get out of them, I wager." The set-scene of the market-place for the denouement of their tale is appropriate indeed, demonstrating both its ability to unveil self-imposed deceptions, and serves as an appropriate location for the conclusion of transactions.

However, the market is shown to be as ephemeral as it is liminal; magic is not a matter for permanency, and even the market at Wall is shown to have an ineluctable end point- one visitor observes that there are "Fewer and fewer of them, every nine-year mark my words, soon enough this market will be just a memory. There's other markets, and other market places, I am thinking . " and indeed her notion stands true. And not all of those market-places conform to past images, not even in their reimagining of the nature of the transactions they will host.

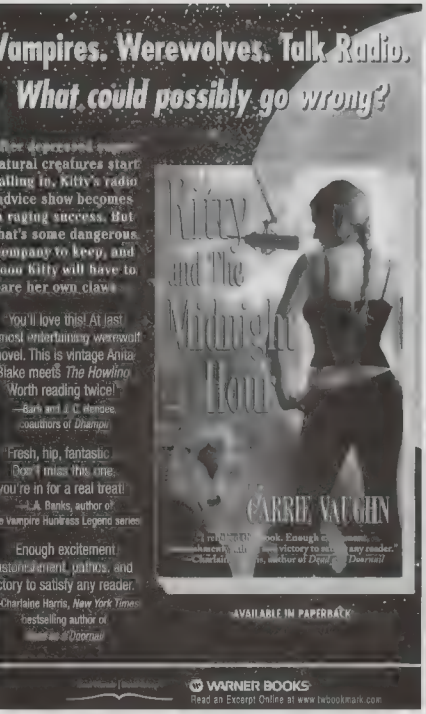
Financial Wizards

Last but most certainly not least, we have the category of the modern market, where authors carry the message of the market into a broader definition, recasting Rossetti's metaphors of addiction and exchange in wholly new fashions. The symbolism of the fruits from Rossetti's poem have been examined under many lights; some have speculated that she intended the fruits to symbolize the pleasures of the flesh, given her references to other victims who succumbed to the goblins in their eagerness for the pleasures that brides hope to have" (Rossetti, Ibid., line 314) and the sheer sensuousness of the descriptions of Laura consuming the fruit. In light of Rossetti's experiences working with prostitutes, this is not an impossible interpretation. But in light of the cravings the fruits induce in those who consume them, and her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti's own experiences with opium, the interpretation of the fruits as being

indicative of the dangers of narcotics is equally valid

Holly Black turns this notion neatly on its head in her novels of latter-day fairies in the tri-state area Her first novel, *Tithe* (2002), touches briefly upon the nature of fairy fruit with its intoxicating descriptions of its effects, but in her second, *Valiant* (2005) Black addresses the question from both sides in her examination of drug-dealing homeless fairy touched mortal youths on the streets of New York who make their living as runners between a faerie pharmacist and his clientele while skimming a little off the top for themselves The drug is intended to provide faeries surrounded by iron with a dose of the glamor that they need to survive, when ingested by mortals, however, it is capable of loaning them a bit of the magic inherent to its customer-base Her "lost" boys and girls call the drug "Never" after the rules that they've created for themselves in connection to it (due to its deleterious side-effects when ingested by humans) "Never more than once a day, never more than a pinch at a time, and never more than two days in a row." But, as with all addictions, this one eventually grows out of control, and in a fashion which demonstrates the chancy nature of life amongst the faeries as the couners grow more and more attached to the illicit mood enhancer which allows them to perform their own magic, faeries among their master's clientele are poisoned, with all fingers pointing to the Never as the substance responsible

Black balances the question of need and responsibility carefully, demonstrating the "fit" of the market Intended recipients of the drugs are harmed only through the deliberate malice of one of their own, whereas the rash desire of the mortal children draws them into a detrimental cycle of self and substance abuse which draws explicitly upon Laura's experience in Rossetti's "Goblin Market" Granted the powers of enchantment through the Never's influence, its users draw further and further away from their human needs We read that "More and more, it was hard to remember the basic things, like eating. Never made crusts of bread into banquet tables groaning with food, but no matter how much she ate, Val was always hungry." When their supply of the drug is cut off in the fallout of the poisonings, the children find fairy fruit to be a kind of a magical methadone, capable of dulling the cravings if not satisfying them, but the final solution is one which Rossetti might not recognize. the heroine is not saved through the sacrifice of another, but rather saves *herself* through a "simple" choice made during a duel Underhill We share Val's thoughts, reading "What might Val miss while she was weaving her own illusions? She felt the weight of the knowledge hit her gut like a swallowed stone. she had to do this without any Never singing under her skin." Val chooses to accept mortal limitations over the fairy gold" of the drug, expanding upon Rossetti's initial creation of the paradigm of mor-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Another illustration by Dante Rossetti, taken from Goblin Market and Other Poems

tal victory through mortal rules in a wholly satisfactory fashion

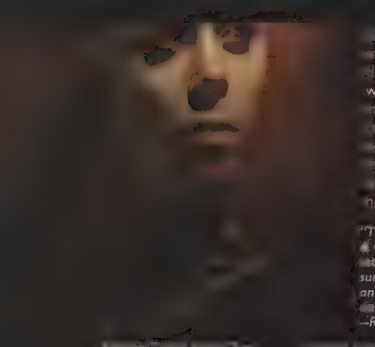
J. K. Rowling's goblins in the world of Harry Potter differ from the typical image of goblins in many ways, but their intrinsic nature is still true to the images present in folklore and in the literary tradition: though there's been no mention of goblin agriculture, the goblins are most certainly still involved in trade, and even in the furthering of addictions (if one reads their gambling with Ludo Bagman in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* as an incident of enabling). Rowling focuses on the goblins in their role of bankers for the most part, a role which grants them a certain degree of control over the wizarding economy, although brief references are made to their tenaciousness. One of the first comments describing them comes from Hagrid in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1997), when he simply says "Never mess with goblins." In additional references to the goblins, Rowling has revealed them to be former opponents of the wizards fighting in various Goblin Rebellions and fomenting discord in works such as *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (2001) where they repeatedly undermined the attempts of the Wizards Council to restrict the definition of "beings" by broadly interpreting guidelines such as possessing two legs or understanding human speech. Their position in the system of the wizarding world is still ambiguous, with, for example, characters in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000) first mentioning a Goblin Liaison Office and later consigning them to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures (Ibid., p. 149). However, signs of their influence can be found in the fact that nearly all elements of the wizarding world presented by Rowling concern commercial trade, whether in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade, demonstrating the pervasive nature of capitalism, its influence, and the goblin's resulting power. Their association with the financial market, by extension a *goblin* market, gives them a source of power in a wizard-oriented world which would otherwise disregard them, necessitating both fair trade and fair treatment.

In the most recent work to address this issue, Delia Sherman's *Changeling* (forthcoming from Firebird Books, Summer 2006) we see how the idea of the goblin market overlaps with the reality of the financial market to an ever-growing degree when Sherman's protagonist, Neef, is sent on a quest to gain three magical items, the last of these being the Scales of the Dragon of Wall Street. Neef describes them thusly: "The Scales of the Dragon of Wall Street are legendary in New York. Between. They're a pair of magic balances that turn paper into gold. You put the paper in one side and gold appears on the other. When you take the gold off, the paper disappears. Sometimes the gold disappears, too, but the Dragon's Scales are still definitely worth having." Sherman's definition is voodoo accounting in action: though the creatures controlling the financial district are not goblins—Neef says "What I knew about the Financial Maze was that it belonged to the Folk who lived for gold: hung out there: giants, kobolds, wyrms, alicantos, some dwarves. No big European dragons, though. The Dragon of Wall Street had long ago eaten all the serious competition"—their magical status and affinity for trade makes for a kind of synecdoche between them all. As the mortals drawn into the world of magic are held there by faerie food, so too, ironically, is the Dragon of Wall Street sustained by mortal substances: coffee is "what the Dragon lives on. Coffee, and Investors." To win the Scales, Neef is challenged to make the Bull laugh and the Bear cry: a seemingly impossible conundrum, but one which she must attempt if she is to fulfill the conditions of her oath. Interestingly, Neef is foiled in her attempt to gain the Scales, playing by the rules set by the Dragon, but manages to fulfill her conditions through a cunning bit of wordplay suggested by her faerie changeling, the titular character again reinforcing the necessary balance of bargaining between the realms.

Conclusion: The Market's Progression

The gradual changes to the facade of the goblin market represent the normalization of conventions which equalize the "exchange rate" between mortality and magic in the liminal realm of the market. However, regardless of how influenced by technology and trade regulations the market may become, it is highly doubtful that we will ever see an end to its myriad permutations, or to its unexpected resolutions. Forbidden fruit is still the sweetest . . . and the bargains are always better in Faerie.

Helen Pilinovsky is currently pursuing doctoral studies at Columbia University, where she is working on the archetypal differences between the canons of Eastern and Western European fairy tales. Her articles and reviews have appeared in *Marvels & Tales: the Journal of Fairy Tale Studies*, *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, and *The Endicott Studio Journal of Mythic Arts* (www.endicott-studio.com). Sections of this article have been drawn from the longer essay "Conventionalism and Utopianism in the Commodification of Rossetti's 'Goblin Market,'" first published in the 2nd Special WisCon Issue of Extrapolation. (Spring 2004. Vol. 45. No. 1)



...ected with people around Kate Reilly, she's managed to stay one step ahead of danger. But not time, it's seeking her out, and there's no way to pre... what might happen next. The Three, servers of the ...vampires with a hive mentality, have decided the feisty ...odhead should be their replacement queen! But she ...her mind would have to die for the honor, she's not ...terested. Can a handsome werewolf help her destroy ...e vampires, or will the deadly encounter end ...her killed instead?

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Linnea Sinclair

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–The Best Reviews

By Gahan Wilson & Paul Witcover

For anthology lovers, it's high season at the bookstore.

Brian Lumley has come to be known mainly for writing large books neatly joined into extended series such as his fine, free-wheeling Necroscope saga. But through the years he has all along been turning out far shorter, but no less effectively fearsome works. I'm very pleased to see he has decided to gather a spooky handful of them up into a highly entertaining little anthology which he's unabashedly entitled **Screaming Science Fiction: Horrors From Outer Space** (Subterranean Press, 166 pp., deluxe hardcover, $35.00)

Since this magazine contains the word "fantasy" in its title it's possible some readers may be frowning in disapproval at our reviewing a book with "science fiction" within its appelation, but Mister Lumley has foreseen all that and presciently headed up this volume with a short, witty forward admonishing readers not to take the notion of genres and subdivisions all that seriously—pointing out previous distinguished violators as widely varied as EC Comics and H.P. Lovecraft. Also, if it's any comfort, I'd like to observe I've always felt science fiction, for all its well-put protestations to the contrary, really is only a subdivision of fantasy after all and should, perhaps, relax.

The earliest story, "No Way Home," written back in 1975, is a particularly lovely example of how Lumley manages to bring in yet another genre, that of humor, without in any way weakening the effectiveness of the story's horror—which I suppose I really have to point out is yet another genre. This is brought home extremely skillfully by the very last two bits of contrasting description at the story's climax which cleverly leaves the reader helplessly straddled with one foot standing on a chuckle and the other on a nervous gulp.

The art of John Jude Palencar adorns Paul Park's A Princess of Roumania.

There's no point in going through the tales title by title but I'm happy to point out that I found "Big C" is as disturbing or perhaps even more so than it was in 1990 (what a change has occurred in a mere fifteen years!). I think I should also probably come out and nominate "The Man Who Saw No Spiders" as the most cleverly built mind trap of all these trappy tales and that I feel it might be kind to warn more timid souls against reading "Feasibility Study," the only story in this collection to appear in print for the first time. It seems that rage and fury, inspired by the grotesque arrogance of our species concerning itself and its supporting environment burns very, very brightly and hotly in the author's heart—it's even liable to singe more tender readers.

Nobody else writes short stories quite like Brian Lumley. You really ought to read them.

To Charles Fort with Love (Subterranean Press, 270 pp., deluxe hardcover, $25.00)

Speaking of genre busters, there are probably none better than Caitlin R. Kiernan. She, like Brian Lumley before her, probably came by it in

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in large part because of the influence of Howard Phillips Lovecraft

As a side note, I find myself more and more amused as the years go by at how totally astounded dear old H.P.L.—who I am sure figured he'd be lucky to achieve even dim recollection amongst a tiny group of obsessives as a noticeably odd pulp scrivener—would be to see that he has turned out to be an increasingly towering influence on some of the best, brightest, and most influential writers presently delighting us with their wonders.

In any case, Kiernan is an especially outstanding figure regarding the science-fiction fantasy brouhaha since she is an actual, bona fide scientist who can therefore give a much more convincing depiction of the scientists in her fantasies being scientific than the usual amateurs who turn their hands to this sort of thing.

The first story in the collection, "Valentia," an account of a paleontologist's discovery of a tetrapod trackway (based, very spookily, on a highly similar trackway which actually exists in the real world), in some fifty or sixty footprints on a very lonely stretch of Irish coast by a walking sea creature 50 million years before the coming of the dinosaurs, is a fine example of how well she does this sort of thing.

It is also just the right way to kick off a collection of tales dedicated to the late, great Charles Fort. *To Charles Fort With Love* is all about something that's sometimes come across in newspaper clippings (and is therefore in your face) but which blatantly defies all of our common sense—even "scientific" notions of the totally awesome and stubbornly mysterious universe we strut around in.

Another side bar: if you are not familiar with the works of Charles Fort then for heaven's sake do yourself an enormous favor and hunt them up and read them. These challenging books were written in the early half of the last century, but instead of becoming dated they have grown ever more relevant despite all their quirks and eccentricities. They will wake you up in all sorts of surprising ways and they are both scary and lots of fun.

The book skillfully plucks pieces from different parts of Kiernan's career. "Spindle shanks" for instance, is an example of her more traditionally spooky work, being an extremely creepy account of highly ghoulish doings affecting decadent folk (Kiernan is top notch when it comes to decadent folk!) in poor old New Orleans—I was glad to read it again. "The Dandinge Cycle," new to me, is made up of three short stories ("A Redress for Andromeda", "Nor the Demons Down Under the Sea" and "Andromeda Among the Stones") concerning an old house perched on a rugged stretch of California Coast that has been hideously defiled and deformed by the awful doings of those who've lived within it. In her afterword to

these stories (there is one after every work and they should all be read) she says she feels the last of them has made the first two "mere footnotes." I think she is spang on with this but altogether this cycle is a wonderfully revealing and instructive look at a really brilliant author working very, very hard to get her magic just right.

Both Kiernan and an observer no less astute than Ramsey Campbell in his afterword flatly state that the best work in *To Charles Fort With Love* is "La Peau Verte," and I absolutely go along with that. It's not only one of the best and loveliest-written scary stories I've ever read, it's also a cautionary tale which I would earnestly recommend any brave young soul presently toying with the notion of becoming seriously involved with the artistic life read and ponder on—just in case they might have second thoughts.

It's always best to have at least a dim glimmer of what you're getting into.

Dark Delicacies edited by Del Howison and Jeff Gelb, Carroll & Graf Publishers, New York, 267 pp., hardcover, $26.00, trade paperback, $15.95)

Dark Delicacies is, so far as I know, the one and only book store in the United States of America which carries nothing but books, magazines, music discs, DVDs, toys, greeting cards, and every variety of novelty stretchily devoted to the horror genre (speaking yet again of genres) which, I guess, tells you something about the United States of America. It is located in Los Angeles, which, I guess, tells you something about Los Angeles.

It is a gorgeous place and a kind of shrine for those who dote on that particular aesthetic: there are few sights more touching than the hordes of devotees who have made a holy pilgrimage to that

revered establishment in order to browse sacred texts, fondle gaudily-boxed movies, and reverently stroke or even try on flowing Dracula capes and flat-topped rubber Frankenstein masks.

Now, *Dark Delicacies* is also an anthology which is, of course, devoted exclusively to horror stories. It's co-edited by Jeff Gelb (*Hot Blood*) and Del Howison who, with his excellent wife and partner, Sue, run the Dark Delicacies store mentioned earlier.

The editors have assembled a formidable group of writers—all of whom I strongly suspect are dyed in the wool Dark Delicacies Store regulars (I've seldom been in the place without running into some awe-inspiring author) who were doubtlessly delighted to accept the invitation to join the throng. I know I was.

The book leads off with an original twist on the vampire story by no less than Ray Bradbury himself, before going on with a stellar list including, among many others, Ramsey Campbell with a harrowing account of the scary possibilities lurking in book tours; John Farris spinning a very funny, very gory story about a murderous Texan tycoon; Nancy Holder with a tasty tale of how really well show biz and cannibalism mix; F. Paul Wilson having fun with a mad Mandarin, and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro with an excellent account of the latest doings of her good friend Saint Germain.

It's obvious one and all of them are having fun and I strongly suspect that you will too.

Songs and Sonnets Atlantean; The Third Series by D. Sidney-Fryer, Phosphor Lantern Press, Los Angeles, CA.)

I would like to inform those interested—and those who are interested will be very interested—that the poet, author, and balladeer Donald Sidney-Fryer, self described (accurately, I think) as "the last of the courtly poets", has at last brought out the concluding volume in his trilogy inspired by the work of Edmund Spencer's "Faerie Queene" and the "California Romantics," including the late, great Clark Ashton Smith, who, one way or another, attempted to follow in that legendary poet's footsteps.

Don has been working on this project for a very long time, now, starting it in 1961 with the first book brought out by one publisher, then a second brought out by another, and now this one, *Songs and Sonnets Atlantean. The Third Series*, which is self published.

It is an extraordinarily unique collection of poems, essays, short stories, and ruminations which will float you off into a wide variety of worlds seen from all sorts of moods. I think you may well enjoy those worlds and profit from your visits.

I have put the mailing address above for the sake of the adventurous.

Gahan Wilson

A Princess of Roumania, by Paul Park Tor Books, New York, hardcover, 368 pp.

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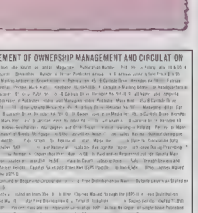
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"When I was a kid," muses Miranda Popescu, the heroine of this brilliantly unorthodox revisionist fantasy, "I used to love those books where the girl feels she doesn't belong, and she's having some kind of problems and she wakes up in a different country—just like this. And she fits into that place like a key into a lock, and everything that made no sense now suddenly makes sense. There are the good guys and the bad guys, the wise king and the shining prince. But I get the feeling we won't find any of that here." Neither, I'm happy to say, will readers.

In the passage quoted above, Miranda is addressing her friend Peter Gross, a teenager who is actually the incarnation of a much older man. Pieter de Graz, who is from a kind of alternate Earth where magic works, people carry spirit animals within them for souls, technology is at the mid-19th century level, North America is a barely colonized wilderness roamed by wolves and Woolly Mammoths and populated by savage tribes of refugees from a tsunami-swallowed England. Christianity is a minor religion alongside thriving pantheistic traditions, and the kingdom of Roumania is a European power threatened by a militaristic Germany nearer to that of Frederick the Great than Hitler. Miranda herself is some five years older than the fifteen-year-old girl she appears to be: the rightful heir to the usurped Roumanian throne and perhaps the "White Tyger" prophesied to bring peace and freedom to her troubled country. Only it isn't *her* country. Her country is the America you and I know, where she was raised in Massachusetts by foster parents who adopted her in Romania ... *our* Romania. Yet she has been transported suddenly to the world of Roumania, where she is the fulcrum of a struggle between great powers both supernatural and mundane. Miranda is joined by Peter, whose birth defect of a mostly missing right arm is bizarrely repaired in the transport, replaced with the adult arm of de Graz, an arm entirely out of proportion to his teenage body; and her best friend Andromeda, who has been transformed into a dog and who, like Peter, somehow contains an older man, in her case the courtier Sasha Prochenko.

These two men, who had served her murdered father, were dispatched with Miranda to America by her aunt, the powerful conjurer Aegypta Schrenck. But this is not quite accurate, for it seems that Aegypta did not simply send Miranda to an already-existing alternate world; she first *created* the world, writing it in the form of a book, and then translated Miranda, de Graz, and Prochenko *into* the book. That book is our America, our world, with all its people, all its history. When the magical book is destroyed, so, it seems, is our world—you and I, presumably, along with it—and Miranda, Peter, and Andromeda are catapulted back into the "real" world, albeit in shapes altered not only from those they wore in our world but from their original, true forms. Presumably this will be explained in future volumes, but it may be a clue that our world has not been destroyed, and may in fact not have been created by Aegypta at all—but this is mere speculation.

Back in the "real world," Miranda and her friends are hunted by powerful enemies, chief among them the Baroness Nicola Ceausescu, an amoral parvenu seeking the restoration of her fortune and influence, who is also the mortal enemy of Aegypta, and the sinister Elector of Ratisbon, who plots for German supremacy and holds Miranda's mother captive. None of Park's villains are cardboard cutouts with "evil" stamped across their foreheads, they are nuanced portraits of fascinating individuals, especially Baroness Ceausescu, who nearly runs away with the book.

With breathtaking skill and a subtlety worthy of John Crowley or Gene Wolfe, Park communicates both the strangeness and the reality of the world in which Miranda finds herself. Usually a fantasy of this type undercuts the perceived strangeness of its alternate world in two main ways. The first is by demonstrating its essential similarity to the "real" world, our own; in other words by taming the landscape, showing, for instance, that magic functions by rules as inflexible as those

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of physics. Park has reversed this tired trope, and the reality of his alternate world lies precisely in its strangenesses. Its magic remains wild. The second way is by supplying locals to befriend and mentor the new arrivals. Dorothy has her Tin Man, Harry Potter his Dumbledore. But the locals Park supplies, including Aegypta, are incompetent or untrustworthy, and frequently both. Thus Miranda and her friends—and readers—must figure things out for themselves as they are propelled along by events entirely out of their comprehension and control; in this, Park is harkening back to the *Alice* books, which as I grow older loom ever larger in my thinking about fantasy: especially fantasies featuring child protagonists. Only, Miranda and the others are not unflappable Victorian moppets but that terrifying breed of child known as the American teenager. They are naive cynics who do not easily bow to authority and are quite capable of perversely acting against their own safety and self-interest for the sheer hell of it. How refreshing!

Paul Park has produced the most audacious and iconoclastic heroic fantasy since *The Golden Compass*, the first book of Philip Pullman's Dark Materials trilogy, from which, it is only fair to note, he seems to have drawn a degree of inspiration. But if Park's invention and nerve do not flag, the Roumania series may surpass Pullman's epic in artistry and accomplishment.

The Girl in the Glass, by Jeffrey Ford, Dark Alley, New York, trade paperback, 286 pp., $13.95, ISBN: 0-060-93619-3.

The Girl in the Glass is a provocative page-turner that is at once a boy's coming-of-age story, a ghost story, an historical novel, a mystery, and an elegiac farewell to a life and a century. Written with humor and compassion it delves unflinchingly into some shameful corners of America's not-so-distant past and raises timely questions about this country's future. When the narrator of the novel, Diego an old man of eighty-four planning to end his life with an overdose of sedatives somewhere in Mexico in 1999, addresses the reader directly on the first page with the words "All I ask is that you believe," he is talking about something more than the credulity essential for ghost stories or, for that matter, the gullibility required of a mark in a con: he is talking about a leap of faith. Go ahead and jump—you're in good hands.

Diego's story is set in 1942, in and among the wealthy estates of Long Island's Gold Coast, where the Depression might almost be in another country. Seventeen-year-old Diego, an orphan and illegal Mexican immigrant, has been "adopted" by Thomas Schell, a con man in the spiritualism racket who stages phony seances for grieving rich folks. Schell acts the part of the medium, while Diego plays his assistant, a Hindu swami named Ondoo (both to take advantage of the perceived exoticism of the Orient and to conceal his Mexican origin in the face of the government's forced

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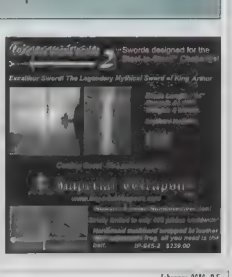
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repatriation policy—just one of the discomfiting bits of history Ford uncovers). A third scam artist, Henry Bruhl, an ex-circus strongman who still goes by his inspired stage name of Antony Cleopatra, provides muscle and legwork, on occasion he impersonates the spirits of the dead summoned up by Schell and Oncloo. It is a testament to Ford's talent that these characters, as well as a cast of supporting characters drawn from the world of freak shows, transcend their stock origins to become complex and believable individuals.

One night, at the climactic moment of a séance, Schell sees, within a pane of glass in a door behind which Antony is manifesting the "ectoplasmic form" of the mark's departed mother, an image of a girl unknown to him. This vision is observed by no one else. A few days later, he sees the image again, this time in a newspaper photograph of a missing child, seven-year-old Charlotte Barnes, the daughter of a wealthy Gold Coast couple. Schell, profoundly shaken by this inexplicable eruption of the seemingly supernatural, which suggests that he, rather than his victims, may ultimately be the real sap, decides to more or less play it straight for once. Using the tricks of his trade to gain the trust of Mr. Barnes, an ardent spiritualist, he sets out to solve the mystery of the girl's disappearance.

Soon the flimflamming detectives find themselves mixed up with murder, the Ku Klux Klan (which in the '20s was rampant throughout Long Island), bootleggers, a mysterious and beautiful psychic named Lydia Hush, who is also on the Barnes case; a monstrous creature like a missing link between ape and human, capable of shrugging off Antony's mightiest punches, and a "scientific" organization called the Eugenics Record Office, bankrolled by rich WASPs devoted to proving the genetic superiority of the white race and to safeguarding its "purity" by means of sterilization, repatriation, stricter immigration laws, and so on. The pernicious doctrines of the ERO and its ilk would go on to influence the madmen of Nazi Germany; thus did good old American can-do racism become a direct precursor of the Final Solution. The reader's knowledge of the crimes of the Nazis as well as of the current resurgence of dangerous beliefs in American exceptionalism and anti-immigrant sentiment fueled by economic woes and fears of terrorism, imparts an ominous vibe that reinforces and transcends the "dubious rigmarole" of Diego's thrilling narrative. In that, *The Girl in the Glass* is like *The Great Gatsby* or *The Day of the Locust* books that also tell a riveting story while engaged in a searching critique of the American Dream or nightmare.

The fantastic element of this novel is somewhat muted, the plot does not turn upon supernatural occurrences. And yet the mystery of the girl in the glass informs everything, and the ambiguity of her apparition can be contrasted with the stark results of it. Jeffrey Ford is an optimist, a man who believes, or wants to believe, in what Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature." That, I think, is the leap of faith that Diego is asking for at the beginning of this ghost story, which, like all fiction, is a kind of confidence game: not just faith in his considerable powers of narration but in the inherent potential of America to live up to its promises, a potential that exists in each of us, inchoate as a spirit, yet whose effects can be made manifest in the world. ❧

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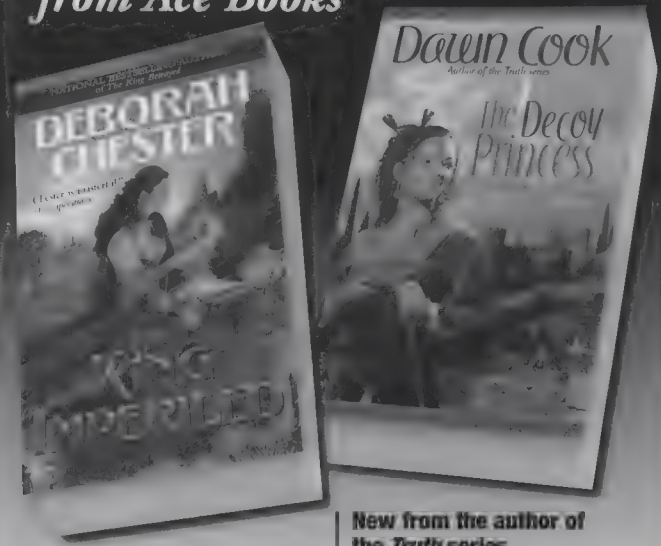

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This time is no different. This time is exactly the same as the last hundred, the last thousand. Since paper was invented. Maybe before. Different people, but always the same objectives.

Because some words are more important than others.

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Written in red. As always.

She reads the words on the piece of paper, burns it, changes into black clothes, leaves her tiny apartment quickly and returns three hours later, shaking, with blood on her fists.

In the shower, more red as the blood washes off, swirls around the drain, vanishes.

When she steps out of the shower ten minutes later, this is written in lipstick on the bathroom mirror. "Next time, keep it clean."

She wraps a bath towel around herself, walks into her bedroom.

Yeah, keep it clean, she thinks. *Like I asked the fat bastard to bleed all over me.*

messages

We humans think it's all about us. What if it's not? • By Brett Alexander Savory • Illustration by Michael Gibbs

"Joseph—"

"Shut up."

"Joseph, listen—"

"Shut the fuck *up*."

The man in the dark blue suit stares hard at Joseph. Contemplates whether he can risk another interruption. Knows he cannot. Decides he doesn't care, anyway. So he just sits quietly and fiddles with a crease in his pants.

And waits.

Joseph holds a red pen in his right hand, taps it on his big wooden desk. Thinking.

"How did she know?" Joseph says, his voice a cracked rock.

The man in the dark blue suit knows there is no way out of this. He knows he is going to die. In this room. Soon.

"There's no way she could have known about Jennings," he says, knowing it's a stupid thing to say. Pointless. Just going through the motions. He imagines he feels the world slowing down, its creator finished with us, no longer watching, no longer caring what happens.

Joseph nods his head, holds his breath, purses his lips. He pulls a very long knife from a sheath taped to the underside of his desk. Shows it to the man in the dark blue suit.

"That manuscript was very important," Joseph says. "Probably the most important manuscript we would ever have worked with. We've been doing this a long time, you and I. You've never fucked up like this. I don't understand it. And don't try to shift the blame. You're the one who hired Jennings."

The knife catches a flicker of light from a nearby lamp. Joseph taps it on the desk a few times, like he'd done with his pen. Breathing now. Just breathing. "And you've nothing from the brother, either? Nothing whatsoever?"

The man in the dark blue suit stays quiet. Just offers up a silent prayer to a god he has never believed in, and that he knows with absolute certainty is no longer watching.

A moment later, Joseph leans forward quickly, buries the knife to the hilt in the man's neck.

no further messages

"So what's it say?"

"What's what say?"

"What do you think? The manuscript. What's it say this time? Staggering earthquake? The second coming of Hitler? Flood, drought, tidal wave, fucking plague of locusts? What?"

Emma Philson stares down at her dinner plate. Her hair is still damp from her shower.

"Don't know. Didn't read it." She looks back up. "It's not my job to read them, it's my job to steal them."

The man across from her puts his fork down on his plate, tilts his head, looks at her with disbelief.

"You've never read any of them? The fate of the world right there in your hands and you don't even sneak a bloody peek?"

Emma picks up her knife and fork, cuts into her fish. "I don't want to know."

The man still staring at her with incomprehension is Jim Leeds, her only contact in the organization. The restaurant they're eating at is a five-star in Vancouver. Neither of them is particularly enjoying the dishes they've ordered. They never do.

"So why do you bother?" Jim says, poking at his mussels.

Emma shrugs. "Your organization pays me very well."

"That's all that matters to you? The money?"

Emma says nothing. She forks a chunk of undercooked fish into her mouth and grimaces.

"I mean, don't you ever think about how important your work is? Don't you get any satisfaction from knowing that through this manuscript maneuvering—"

"I wish you'd stop calling it that," Emma interrupts, her voice rising. "We kill people and steal their writings."

Jim leans forward, looks at her hard. His fingers curl tight around the glass of red wine in his hand. "Keep Your Voice *Down*."

He leans back slowly, straightens his tie, sips from his wine, then glowers at his food, pushes his plate away.

Emma stares out the window, all pretence to enjoying a lovely dinner with a colleague vanished.

"They aren't *their* writings anyway, Emma. They're not owned by anyone."

"Jim?" Emma says, leaning forward, lowering her voice to a whisper. "Listen to me, okay? I'm bored. And I'm tired of acting like this shit is somehow beneficial to the human race. Doesn't matter how many people get killed as long as we get our manuscript. As long as these documents make it into the 'right hands,' everyone's happy. Well, fuck that, *I'm* not happy."

Emma leans back, takes a deep breath.

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I don't want to do this anymore, Jim."

Jim doesn't blink, doesn't waver. "But you will, won't you." Statement. Fact.

Emma sighs, looks out the window again, at city lights, at cars, trains, people. She nods slowly.

But Emma knows something Jim doesn't. She lied, she *has* read the manuscript for which she slit the fat man's throat.

Seth Philson fidgets in his seat. Not because he is afraid of flying, not even because he has to piss so bad his teeth are floating. Seth fidgets because he is six-foot-seven and airplane seats are not made for people his height. He squirms around in his aisle seat, cursing the fact that no one with a roomier emergency-exit seat would swap with him. He tries to get comfortable first with his little pillow—folding and scrunching it, placing it between his knees and on the back of the seat in front of him—then without it. No dice either way. And no matter which way he tries it, the guy in the seat ahead turns around and glares at him.

Five foot fuck-all, Seth thinks. *Must be real tough to get comfortable in that seat when you're bloody well swimming in it, eh, shithead?*

More fidgeting. Deep sighing. If he could afford first-class, he'd be up there in a heartbeat, but writing jacket copy for crappy mainstream paperbacks sure isn't going to buy him a ticket up there—he's lucky he can afford this trip to Vancouver at all.

Seth needed a vacation. Seth was having very sharp, very clear images of ripping off his co-workers' heads.

Mountains. Snow. Calming white. A visit with his sister, whom he hasn't seen in…how many years has it been? He has no idea.

As the plane taxies up the runway, Seth closes his eyes and pictures the resort he's booked into. He inhales deeply, exhales slowly. The plane's thrumming engines help with the overall effect, blurring his thoughts, mashing his anger at short people down, down…until he feels the plane lift off, its nose scoop upward.

He looks out the window to his right, across the aisle. The ground slowly gives way to blue sky, dotted with little puffs of cloud. Pure white.

He keeps his breathing steady until the plane reaches its cruising altitude, waits for the pilot's permission to operate assorted technological gadgets, and reaches down into the thin black bag at his feet.

Seth's gadget of choice is a laptop. Using its word processing program, he writes stories and essays on it that he has never let anyone see. He figures he probably never will. Not because he thinks they're bad, not because he has self-esteem issues, but because those words are his and his alone. They are not written for other people to see, and they are certainly not written for sale. He might well be able to sell his stories, but this doesn't interest him.

What interests him even less is writing jacket copy for other people's shitty writing.

Seth powers up his laptop, waits for his Flying Spaghetti Monster wallpaper to come up, opens his word processor, and opens "magicians_hangnail.rtf." The title page pops up. He scrolls down to the first page, reads the three pages he wrote last night, cues up his cursor, and stares at it for the next five minutes.

Blink. Blink.

"You a writer?"

Guy next to him. Filthy bugger. Messy hair. Uneven beard the color of burnt chestnuts. Sloppy blue eyes too big for his ruddy, round face.

"Nope," Seth says. Goes back to staring at the blinking cursor.

"So, if you don't mind my asking, what's that you're working on?"

Fake cheer: Boy, I sure want to get to know you, even though I really don't give a flying fuck what you're doing or why.

"Short story," Seth says, this time not turning his face away from the cursor.

"But I thought you just said—"

"I'm not a writer. I write things in this little computer here, but I'm not a writer. Writers sell their stories, join workshops to have their work critiqued for improvement. I do neither of those things. I do not consider myself a writer."

"Oh," the filthy guy says. Faces forward again.

Seth stares at the cursor and hopes that when he lands in Vancouver his sister Emma won't ask him about his writing. He has told her not to before, but she persists—Emma and whatever the hell it is she does for a living. Something that requires her to travel a lot—almost more than Seth, and Seth practically lives on airplanes. Whenever he asks for more information about her job, she asks for more information about his latest short story. And that's where the conversation ends.

Though Seth is wholly unaware of it, a man in a dark blue suit sits three rows back and to the right of him. Ostensibly reading *The Vancouver Sun*, but watching. Waiting for Seth's fingers to connect with the laptop's keys.

Waiting for him to start typing.

"Give me the manuscript. I won't ask again."

"Fuck you, cunt."

The fat man holding the sheaf of papers reeks like a compost heap. Emma's head swims from the stench. She closes her eyes, steadies herself.

Always the same game: One side tracks the writer down, waits for the fugue to begin and end, kills the writer, makes off with the man-

uscript. The only difference is that the "good" side leaves the manuscript intact, the "bad" side edits it to serve its own agenda. The line between the two is blurry at best. Now, standing here in this disgusting man's shithole apartment, listening to him call her a cunt, Emma has one clear thought: *I want out. This is the last one.* A voice in her head—not her own—telling her to pack it in.

She'll bring it up with Jim tonight at dinner.

"Fuck me, huh?" Emma says, brings her gun out of her holster quickly, trains it on the fat man's face. "Hand it over, and I let you walk. Simple deal."

The man backs up, trips over a phone book on the floor behind him, but doesn't fall. He raises his free hand, warding her off, his bravado leaking out of his pores along with his sweat. "Look…look, please don't shoot. I'm sorry, okay?"

This is the best they have? Emma thinks. *This snivelling mound of flab?*

"I don't want apologies," she says, kicking the phone book out of the way, advancing on the enemy operative. "I want the manuscript."

Back against the wall. No more name-calling, no more false courage: a man caught without his gun. Now just the stench of garbage, sweat rolling down a fat, pimply face, wrinkles like a pitbull. Apologetic. Pathetic.

But Emma has never killed anyone with a gun, its only use for her is intimidation. She pulls a knife from a sheath behind her back. Steps forward. Slashes at the man's outstretched arm. It cuts the skin, the man cries out, drops his arm. Blood drips onto the plush beige carpet. The fat man's other hand still clenches the manuscript for a moment, then drops it as he uses this hand to try to stop the flow of blood from his arm.

When he looks down at his wound, moves his free hand over to press on it, Emma steps forward quickly, drags the blade across the man's throat and moves out of reach again in one quick motion. Emma hits an artery, takes a heartbeat's worth of spray in the face.

The fat man slumps, gurgles, drops.

Emma wipes her face with her forearm, reaches down, grabs the manuscript.

Normally, she would clean up. Carpet is a bitch, and it would take her most of the night, but normally she'd do it.

But this is the last one, she tells herself.

So she lets him bleed out.

The man in the dark blue suit should have known better than to hire that fat piece of shit Jennings, brother of one of their best. Nepotism and triple-checked referrals are the only way anyone gets in—and this blubbery fuck came highly recommended—but still, the man should have known. Just by looking at him. It wasn't in his eyes: what it takes. To kill without flinching, to kill without knowing why. Could be built like a brick shit house and talk the hardest game in town, but when it came to murdering people for nothing more than a sheaf of paper, you had to see that capability in their eyes.

The man in the dark blue had not seen it in Jennings' eyes, but he would have caught shit from every direction had he fought it, regardless of his experience, his years of moving manuscripts.

And now he has to tell Joseph.

And Joseph will not be happy.

Leaving the clean-up crew behind him—hacking arms, legs, and head from the corpse—the man in the dark blue suit turns the unconguously fancy brass knob on the front door of Jennings' hovel, steps out into the hallway.

He does not expect to live out the next twenty-four hours.

But there is one more potential fugue writer to track before he's due back at headquarters, and that might give him something with which to placate his boss.

If he doesn't get a move on, he'll be late for his flight.

Emma sits at her kitchen table, stares at the manuscript in front of her. Black cup of coffee steaming in her right hand. Her left is shaky, fluttering, hovering over the first sheet of the 213-page manuscript.

Sometimes she looks. Most times, she doesn't bother. Not that it's boring -the direct word of God can be called many things, but hardly boring. If that's what these are, that is—writings from God, channelled through ordinary people from every nation on earth.

She thinks that's what they are, but there are other theories. Collective subconscious. Messages from aliens. Mass hallucinations. Whatever you believed, it hardly mattered. What mattered was that people dropped into some other state of mind when they wrote these manuscripts. They blipped out for minutes, hours, sometimes *days* at a time, wrote instructions, stories, parables, poetry, essays, in hundreds of languages. The occasional predictions were what made it hardest to discount the phenomenon.

Since its discovery, instructions and predictions have made up more and more of each manuscript. Less stories, less fables, less vague lessons. More hard truth, more concrete directions.

As if time were running out.

The coffee slides down Emma's throat, warms her belly, makes her sweat, quickens her pulse ever so slightly. She sets the mug down, turns the first page over, her hand still shaking, but now under relative control.

Three pots of coffee later, she has read the entire manuscript.

Shivers rack her slight frame as she gets up from the table, head spinning, full of information that, in the hands of the other side, could destroy everything. Certain things denoted authenticity, and they were incredibly hard to fake—hard, but not impossible.

The President of the United States, the Prime Ministers of Canada and Britain, leaders all over the world, they sometimes see the originals, sometimes the doctored versions—depending on who died, depending on which side got the upper hand. These world leaders, though aware of this bizarre "automatic writing" phenomenon, do not know where the manuscripts come from. They just arrive, are reviewed for authenticity by staff experts, then are hand-delivered to them.

Emma's organization has tried to warn them of the other side's efforts to tamper with these manuscripts, but their messages are never received. They are always intercepted before they reach anyone on the inside who could be trusted with the information. Or, if they *are* received, they're ignored as having come from an "unreliable source."

Sometimes, at least, the manuscripts themselves get through. Untouched, unchanged. But more often than not, they arrive skewed, tainted, adjusted to perpetuate wars and greed.

Surely these leaders think they're doing the will of their respective gods when they follow these words. Certainly they believe what they're doing is right for their people. They really have no reason to believe otherwise. An inexplicable direct line to the Big Guy in the Sky.

But this manuscript … this one absolutely *needs* to arrive untouched. There are too many ways to manipulate what it says, too many gaps in the physical spacing of the handwriting.

What is probably the most important document in history, Emma thinks, *is right here under my arm.* She slips on her coat, makes sure her gun is loaded (this time she *will* use it, if necessary), and heads to the airport to pick up her brother, Seth. She glances at her watch, realizes she will probably be late.

She hopes the flight is a little behind schedule.

But the most important document in history is not under Emma's arm; it is currently being written on Flight 762 to Vancouver, British Columbia.

The man in the dark blue suit watches Seth's mannerisms, knows it should hit him soon—the fugue state he has seen so many times in his career. Seth fits the profile to the proverbial 'T.' Certain types of personalities are more susceptible to the phenomenon: lonely drunkards, societal freaks, geeks—anti-social types, in general. Behavioral experts working for the man in the dark blue suit's organization have computers that calculate probability based on past fugue writers, they crunch numbers, input personal information

about as many traceable humans on earth as possible, extrapolate the data, then tell the operatives who to watch and, subsequently--in nine cases out of ten--who to kill

Once his name had popped up on their screens, they'd had their eye on Seth Philson for almost as long as they'd had their eye on his sister. But for very different reasons.

The man in the dark blue suit—so uncomfortable in his own skin that he often worries about having his own name pop up on his organization's computers—thinks that most times things just go to shit for no good reason at all, just the natural entropy of the universe. But tonight … tonight, he feels like things might just work out.

He is just about to get up and go to the bathroom when Seth's head nods

Once

Twice

Drops completely, head resting on his chest

When his head comes up again, this time very slowly, his fingers suddenly move swiftly over the keyboard, writing. Words not his own.

The man in the dark blue suit sits tight, waits to see if it's going to be one of these "flash sessions," as his organization calls them—a few brief insights into whatever power controls fugue writers. These synaptic blips usually produce indecipherable sentences—a bad connection, a cosmic wrong number.

But after fifteen full minutes of constant tapping on the keys, the man knows this one is real. He just hopes it isn't a two- or even three-day marathon, else he'll have nothing with which to assuage Joseph when he breaks the news about Jennings' monumental fuck-up.

He rises to go to the bathroom, squeezing out into the aisle.

He does not turn his head in either direction on his way; if he had done so, he would have seen, off in the distance, a bright white flash of lightning.

The first of many.

In seat 15C, Seth Philson, gripped by something unknowable, continues to write.

After dinner with Jim—and her abortive attempt to quit her job—Emma drives to the airport through sheets of rain so heavy she thinks the glass will crack, splinter, and cave in before she gets anywhere near the airport.

She calls ahead and Seth's flight is right on time, meaning she'll be late picking him up. Perfect. A great foot to get off on with her brother, whom she'd not seen in at least six years. She wonders if she'll tell him about her job this time. If ever there was a time she wanted to tell *someone* about it, get the burden off her chest, now was that time.

But she knows she won't, no matter if it would help bring Seth and her closer. Their mother dead from an early age, and their father off travelling God knows where—apathetic about their existence, as he'd always been—they'd floated off to very different lives, drifting without much thought as to what they would do next. Content to depend on no one. Be with no one.

Emma slows down as the rain turns to marble-sized chunks of hail, drumming off her car roof. The sound is deafening, and Emma feels a headache winding its way through her spine, up into her brain.

She changes lanes. Closes her eyes for a moment.

When she reopens them, the night flashes white, lightning touches down not far ahead, near the airport. Thunder cracks—the loudest she's ever heard it—and something explodes, bursts into flame.

Behind her, in the rear-view mirror, more lightning touches down, slices the dark, burns orange-blue after-images into her retinas. More thunder, more buildings on either side of her exploding, filling the night air with the smell of ozone, the crackling of fire.

Emma slows to a crawl, terrified. She sees the airport, nearly half of it engulfed in flames, rise over the horizon. She watches as a plane coming in for a landing—unable to safely pull up once the airport exploded—bursts apart, lightning cleaving it in two.

She slams on the brakes, pulls the car over to the shoulder, opens the door, steps out onto the tarmac. She hugs herself, shaking in the rain, stares at the destroyed plane in the distance, glances quickly at the flames all around her.

Where are you, Seth? she thinks, looks skyward, her brain unable to move out of shock and into an appropriate panic response.

Through the black rain, she sees a blinking light far off, glances at her watch, knows that Seth must be aboard this plane; the one that just exploded is too early to be his.

She tries to think of an explanation for the destruction around her, but is only capable of thinking one clear, useless thought. *Stay up there, Seth. Please.*

Stay up there.

When the man in the dark blue suit comes out of the bathroom, he immediately notices several passengers looking and pointing out the windows. He returns to his seat, leans across a sleeping woman next to him, peers out the window. Flashes of lightning crisp the night sky. Some of it looks pretty low to the ground, but nothing he hasn't seen before.

He shrugs, glances over at Seth—still clattering away—and settles back into his seat. The plane suddenly hits some heavy turbulence. After a few seconds of rocky riding, the captain comes over the speaker, announces that they've hit some turbulence.

Thank you, Dr. Obvious, the man in the dark blue suit thinks.

The captain goes on to say that they'll be starting their descent into Vancouver very soon, asks people to please return to their seats and fasten their seatbelts. What he does not say over the speakers is that in the cockpit there is some tension, as they've just lost radio contact with Vancouver International Airport. But the captain is confident that once they break through the heavier clouds below, radio reception will clear up.

Seth does not fasten his seatbelt. Seth continues to type.

The man watching Seth catches a glimpse of his document. Many different languages are displayed across the screen—some the man can distinguish, others he cannot. Fascinated, he unbuckles his seatbelt, goes out into the aisle, hangs back a few feet, trying not to appear nosy. He reaches up to an overhead compartment, rustles about with a few bags, hoping no one remembers that this isn't where he originally stashed his carry-on luggage. But people are either staring down at the lightning storm, or closing their eyes to catch a few more Zs while the plane descends.

A few more pecks of the laptop's keys, then Seth stops typing, drops instantly into a deep sleep, slumped over his computer. The man in the dark blue suit can only see the bottom half of the last page of the document.

The words are in English, as follows:

This is not, and never has been, about you. Any of you
This is not, and never has been, about good and bad
This makes no sense to you, I know
I have taken all who are worthy
There will be no further messages

The man in the dark blue suit slumps against one of the seats in the aisle, as if having just had the wind knocked out of him. He has never known religion, never wanted to know it, but he feels, very distinctly, something leave him just then. The word "soul" comes to mind, but he does not feel that this word fits.

A burly male flight attendant bustles up behind him, escorts him to his seat, tells him to buckle his seatbelt.

Just then there is a bright flash, taking a snapshot of the turmoil in the sky. A loud thud rocks the aircraft. A fire blazes on the left wing. Another strike and the engine on that side of the airplane flames out.

Seth Philson wakes up to screaming.

Below the black clouds under the plane—clouds that Flight 762 has just broken through—Vancouver International Airport burns.

Emma sits on the hood of her car, drenched, sobbing, waiting for another glimpse of the blinking light to cut

through the clouds, hoping the tiny light stays up there, or carries on to another airport to land. Surely, unlike the other plane, Seth's will see the devastation below and have time to pull up.

Over the thunder and drilling rain, she hears a droning engine, searches the sky, sees a bright flash, a sharp crack, and her heart stops, kicks twice in her chest, flutters. The plane breaks through the low-lying clouds. She raises her right hand to her mouth at the same time that the fire bursts to life in the left engine: a tiny firefly weaving and bobbing far above her.

Unable to do anything but stare, Emma watches, wide-eyed, open mouthed, as fierce winds batter the plane around in the sky for several torturous minutes. Nearly overhead, it tilts, rights itself, loses altitude, nose dipping, then straightens up again. Now directly above, another lightning strike sears its tail, temporarily blinding her.

Seth, she thinks, a strange calm coming over her. *Where are you going? I'm here, Seth. Right here below you.*

When the plane crashes into a forest about a mile away—continued lightning strikes from the overcharged air missing her by less than a hundred feet—she imagines she feels the earth shudder. Imagines she feels it ripple through her entire body.

She expects an explosion to accompany the plane crash, but there is nothing. Just silence after it disappears over the highest treetop.

She feels something inside her, some part of her, slip away, drift up into the night.

After calmly calling in the plane crash from her cell phone, Emma drives home. As soon as she's a few miles away from the crash site, the weather abruptly clears up. The rain and hail stop, the lightning peters out, the winds grow calm.

The manuscript on Emma's passenger seat—the one she thought would change the world forever if it wound up in the wrong hands—is now blank. Even as she leans over from the driver's side, incredulous, flipping through the hundreds of pages, the words fade before her eyes.

A conversation she'd had with Jim Leeds at dinner earlier that night, after she told him she wanted to quit her job, comes back to her as she drives:

"So what do you think it is?" Jim asked.

"What do I think what is?" Emma said, still annoyed that Jim was so certain she would keep doing her job, even though she hated it.

"Where do you think they're coming from? The words."

Emma was silent for nearly a full minute. She swilled wine around in her glass.

"I think they're coming from God."

Jim snorted. "God? I didn't know you believed."

"I don't. But I think that's where the words are coming from."

The next day, *The Vancouver Sun* runs a story about the disastrous crash of Flight 762, the obliteration of the airport, and the bizarrely focused lightning storm that disintegrated every building and airplane within a two-mile radius of the crash site.

There is also a smaller article about reports of disappearances throughout Vancouver. At press time, several hundred other missing-persons reports were coming in from around the world. Police, the paper said, were investigating.

Incredibly, Seth was safe. A little bruised and battered, but otherwise fine. As were all 114 of the other passengers aboard the plane. A "miracle," the *Sun* said.

Seth's laptop, however, was not so lucky; it was lost in the crash.

A week later, sitting across from his sister in her apartment, eating French toast and sipping coffee, Seth tells his sister what he remembers about the flight.

"I remember getting on the plane, and I remember some guy beside me asking if I was a writer. I told him no. Then I remember getting sleepy. That's it." Seth cuts into a piece of toast, jabs it with his fork, sops up some syrup with it, and pops it into his mouth.

"That's it? Nothing about the crash?"

"Nothing."

Emma gets up from her chair, heads for the shower. She stops at the doorway leading to the bathroom.

"You're staying for … a while, Seth?" she says.

Seth looks up, sees something in his sister's eyes he's never seen before. He thinks it might be loneliness. He thinks he might have some of that right now in his own eyes.

"Yeah," he says. "I'm staying for a while. As long as you need me."

Emma smiles, steps into the bathroom, closes the door quietly.

The man in the dark blue suit dials Emma Philson's number from a phone booth downtown. She sounds breathless when she answers, as if having had to run to grab the receiver before it stopped ringing.

"Hello?"

"Emma Philson?"

A pause. "Who is this?" One hand dries her hair with a towel, the other holds the phone.

"There will be more disappearances," the man says. "More reported each day. Probably millions."

"Who the *hell* is this?"

"All the work we've done—none of it mattered, none of it changed anything, Ms. Philson. Good or bad, it didn't matter at all. Judgement day has come and gone, and now we're all just walking around, already dead. Just too fucking stupid to lay down."

Perhaps having an idea who this might be, Emma says nothing. Just listens.

"Your brother. He wrote this. On the plane, just before it went down. I was there to steal his manuscript, kill him. He was a rogue writer. I'm surprised you didn't know. Just listen. This is not, and never has been, about you. Any of you. This is not, and never has been, about good and bad. This makes no sense to you, I know. I have taken all who are worthy. There will be no further messages."

Emma calls the man in the dark blue suit by his real name. "Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer."

"Yes, it's me," the man says, his voice rusted, hollowed out. "You know, I thought maybe there really was something to this whole good and bad thing. I thought maybe when I called you, there would be no answer. That maybe you'd have disappeared along with the others. Taken … wherever." His voice trails off, and he feels the emptiness inside his chest more acutely now. It squeezes his heart. The man coughs once, looks across the street. His eyes drift up to his boss's office window.

"Hello?" Emma says tentatively. The man hears her as a dead voice in a tin can.

"I'm here," he replies. Breathes deeply, feels his chest tighten more. "There will be no more manuscripts, Emma. It's over. All of it. We were never in control. Whether we believed in them or not, there were always other, bigger forces at work. God, the Devil, or something else entirely, what does it matter in the end?"

No reply.

The man hangs up the phone.

Emma listens to the deadline hum for a long time. She is crying and has no idea why.

The man in the dark blue suit crosses the street carefully, making sure to look both ways, climbs three flights of stairs, enters Joseph's office, sits down.

"Joseph—"

"Shut up."

"Joseph, listen—"

"Shut the fuck *up*."

The man in the dark blue suit stares hard at Joseph. Contemplates whether he can risk another interruption. Knows he cannot. Decides he doesn't care, anyway. So he just sits quietly and fiddles with a crease in his pants.

And waits to die for nothing.

SWANS MATE FOR LIFE, AND HUMANS, WE KNOW, DO NOT. SO IF A SWAN BECOMES A HUMAN, OR A HUMAN A SWAN, WHAT BECOMES OF THOSE THEY LEAVE BEHIND?

BY DEBORAH ROGGIE
ILLUSTRATION BY
SCOTT GRIMANDO

Swanlight

1.

All the wizard Camir found was his plundered iron- [illegible] taken flight. As long as they kept to their swan shapes, he [illegible] to find them. For the man he cared nothing. But for the wizard's young wife, Doura, it was another matter. Once she resumed human form, Camir would hunt her down and kill her.

2.

The swans flew over the moonlit lands, south to the glittering Inner Sea, over tiny uninhabited islands and ships smuggling goods in the dark. Then over land again, climbing high above mountain passes and tumbled stone fortresses built beyond memory. Then down, following a river across a wide flood plain, never stopping until at last they [illegible]

Here they spied a narrow channel protected from the wind by the tall marsh grasses, and here they nestled close together, muscles trembling from unaccustomed effort. At [illegible]

3.

[illegible] *Not swan,* he said. *But* [illegible]

She nipped him.

We don't want to stay in swan-shape too long, Garan said.

Speak for yourself, said Doura, admiring her reflection in the water. She stretched a wing, sunlight shone through her feathers.

[illegible]

Not yet, said Doura, cropping her graceful neck and looking [illegible]

4.

They lived on the marsh, on mussels and wild celery, mermaid weed, and dragonfly larvae. But as the days gradually lengthened, Garan began to find it difficult to plan ahead, or simply to remember why he was there. For whole hours at a time, words, memories, his human self slipped away. And then it would all come flooding back: their flight, their tears, their hopes, their love.

Doura scoffed at his worries.

I guess I don't remember, she said carelessly, smoothing a wing. *Was it important?*

Of course it's important! We're losing the words for what's happened to us. We're losing our past.

Words? They're not real. They're just noise. And who needs the past? It's just pain and old words. I don't live in the past now; I don't know what it means, and I don't care. Wind and water and sunlight on the marsh grass, who needs more than that?

But Garan did not want to lose what he had once been.

5.

Plumm ran down to the marsh one afternoon to see the wild swans her brother had mentioned. Her sister-in-law, Lanya, would disapprove, no doubt: a grown woman, evading her work like a moody young girl. Womenfolk belonged at their houses, or close by, where their men could keep an eye on them. But Plumm craved solitude now and then, and would escape the farmstead whenever she could.

In warmer weather, she'd brought sheep to graze here on the hill overlooking the marsh. In spring and fall it would be noisy with birds; in summer the bullfrogs below would give throaty concerts, and innumerable insects would whirr and chirrup and click and buzz; but on a still, sunny day in late winter all she heard was the sound of wind in the reeds.

She'd almost given up—her work was waiting, the children were bound to make some new mess in her absence—when a movement caught her eye. There they were! A pair of great white birds gliding on a bit of open water, black-billed, straight-necked, perfectly matched. A nesting pair, though swans, she knew, wouldn't summer here, but would fly to the far north of whoknows-where to nest and raise their young before returning in the fall. This pair moved in harmony, as if they were the only two swans in the world. They faced each other and bowed, then stretched and beat their wings, ruffling the water, and bowed again with great dignity. Plumm watched with envy: they had each other.

And their voices—how could she describe them? Low, and melodious, and clear. Again they repeated their dance. Each lived for the other alone, that was obvious. And what did she live for? She was a dependent in her brother's household: Plumm, plain and sturdy, with no prospect of a husband or a house of her own. Auntie Plumm: just another pair of hands to cook and clean and weave and wipe the children's runny noses—her brother's children. Dull hair knotted back out of the way, just thirty and already they called her Poor Old Plumm when they thought she couldn't hear.

The swans glided out of sight behind the tall grasses, and Plumm sighed and prepared to climb the hill back to home.

She glanced back for a last look, in time to see the swans emerge again and glide toward a spit of land. Necks entwined, they drifted for a long moment. Then they parted, and one waddled out of the water, out of its element, grace lost. It preened its breast feathers with a growing ferocity, tugging, pulling, tearing—the other swan cried out piteously—until its very skin split open and slipped off, leaving a man crouched at the water's edge. His hair was as dark as his feathers had been white and he was roughly clothed. He fell onto his knees and caught his breath, then rose, staggering, gathering up the swan skin and holding it close. The other swan remained in the water.

Plumm found herself shaking. The swan skin he held—limp, head dragging, the great white wing tips touching the ground, feathers alive to every breath of wind—filled her with a sick horror. What kind of creature could emerge from such a thing at will? How had he come by it? Worse, how had it been severed from the original creature? She dreaded what might happen next. Nature had been overturned, had been corrupted. Mortals were not meant to see such things. No good could come of it. She turned and ran back up the hill, careless of who or what might see, and kept going until she reached home.

6.

Doura gazed curiously at the man upon the shore, and with an effort remembered that he was the reason she was here paddling among the reeds. She maneuvered against the current to stay in place. The man was saying something. She had the feeling that she should understand his strange sounds. She had understood him once, she remembered, and not so very long ago. Perhaps if she paid more attention—

But the north was calling to her, filling her with an unaccustomed restlessness. It told her that soon it would be time to take wing and head to the nesting grounds for the summer. She couldn't linger here much longer. She shook her tail feathers, turned away, and glided deeper into the marsh.

7.

When the thaw came, the new grass greening, and the days softening like a maid being courted, a man appeared at the farm, looking for work. Plumm saw at once it was the fellow from the marsh. He was tall and gaunt and unkempt, his dark hair wild, and his workman's clothes the worse for wear. Warrent would have turned him off if the man had not been fair-spoken, carrying himself with a quiet, unthreatening pride.

She had told no one. Poor Old Plumm, they would have said. Funny Aunt Plummie, the children would have cried, oh, it's one of your stories, tell us again! But this thing that had happened was not for the telling. She had kept away from the marsh.

Yet here he was, standing at the threshold, as real as burnt oatmeal, nothing swan-like about him. His beard was untrimmed, his hands, heavy and strong.

"Where are you from?" her brother Warrent asked.

"From Huret, far north of here," came the answer.

"You're a long way from home."

"A man may need to make a new home in exile. I've been living at the edge of the marsh this past month or more."

Plumm's sister-in-law narrowed her eyes. Lanya was a careful woman who counted the eggs twice and kept the keys to the storeroom on a chain at her waist. She looked the stranger over, searching for a telltale brand. If he were a runaway thief, though, he'd eluded capture. Plumm felt embarrassed at Lanya's obvious mistrust.

"It's a cold wind comes off that marsh," Plumm said.

He nodded. "Aye. Work will warm me."

"There's always work for a willing pair of hands on this farm," said her brother affably. He was as trusting as his wife was suspicious. He held out his hand. "Warrent. This is my wife, Lanya, and my sister, Plumm."

The stranger grasped the offered hand with both of his. "Garan."

"You're welcome to take your meals with us," said Warrent. Lanya's scowl deepened.

"Where shall he sleep?" Plumm asked her brother. Lanya gave her a look, as if to say, Why should that interest you, Mistress Plumm?

"Oh, I've built a hut at the marsh-edge, in the shelter of the hill," said Garan. "It's spare but it keeps the wind out—so you needn't worry, mistress," he said with a grin, looking at Plumm.

She refused to blush. "I'm merely being practical," she said. "And you'd best remember Lanya is mistress here."

8.

A few days later, Lanya's youngest, Biri, proudly carried the old gray cat over to Garan as he was splitting logs to show him how well she could carry the poor, patient creature—when suddenly it hissed and spat, and sprang from the child's arms. Biri howled with shock and disappointment. "What did you do to the poor thing?" Lanya scolded, which made Biri burst into hiccupping sobs. But Plumm noticed that the cat watched Garan ever after, tail twitching, intent.

The geese were another matter. They set up a racket whenever Garan went near the poultry yard. The whole silly, suspicious crew

followed him along the fence, stretching their long necks and wagging their heads down low, hissing. Plumm saw that he soon learned to avoid that part of the farmyard.

All that spring Plumm watched the new hired man, waiting for some confirmation of what she had seen in the marsh. He chopped wood, mended fences, hauled water, and helped with whatever work needed doing. Garan was clever with his hands. He never minded fixing a broken pot handle or sharpening kitchen knives. Plumm admired that in a man: the ability to set things right.

But at night she dreamed of soft feathers, of moonlight on silent beating wings, and of webbed feet treading across her scrubbed wooden floors.

9.

In his hut at the edge of the marsh, Garan dreamed of flying away north, past the islands and out to sea, over floating mountains of ice and up to the pale green lands where the sun shone so far into the night that night itself was merely a brief twilit pause between the long, long days. He dreamed of paddling the little channels of the marsh, of diving for mussels and roots and coming up and shaking the water from his feathers in the sun. And he dreamed of Doura, in her own dear shape, her hand on his shoulder, leaning close, her eyes bright with laughter, about to tell him—

Garan woke and shivered in the darkness. And wondered when Doura would find her way back to the salt marsh.

10.

For three days there'd been no sign of the hired man up at Marsh Gate Farm, which wasn't like him. "I'm going down to Garan's place to see if he's all right," Plumm announced on the fourth morning.

"He's probably taken off," said Lanya as she scoured a stubborn stain. She was as sour on wash days as the pile of laundry that awaited her. "I always expected he would."

Plumm said nothing, but pulled her shawl off its peg and headed out the door. Halfway down to the marsh, she heard running footsteps behind her. Warrent caught her arm and gasped, "Let me catch my breath."

"Let me guess. Lanya sent you to protect me."

He nodded.

"And to make sure I don't linger."

He wouldn't meet her eyes.

This was the second of Garan's huts, and an improvement over the first, for Warrent had loaned Garan his axe, and Garan had put it to good use. It was a tiny cottage, set near a spring partway up the hill above the marsh, well and thickly thatched with marsh-grass, with only one room and a door, and a narrow window on the far side.

Plumm went to the door, and called, "It's Warrent and Plumm. Can we come in?" She heard a groan within and pushed open the door. She stepped down into the hut, for the hard dirt floor was below ground level, an old trick to save building materials yet still allow one to stand upright beneath a roof.

Garan had fashioned a truckle bed out of a mat of thick, coiled straw rope. There she found him, confused and burning hot in a tangle of old blankets that Plumm had given him without Lanya's knowledge. Quickly she said to Warrent, "Do not come in! It's a fever, for sure, but I cannot say if it's the catching kind."

Warrent backed out of the hut and peered in the door. "Should you be in there?"

"I'm already in," Plumm said. "But you must stay out. I won't have either of us carrying sickness back to the farm. Now, let me think. I've got water here, and fuel, and a tinder-box. I'll need a small pot, food for me, and broth—mind you, that's important. Lanya will know what I need."

"You're staying here?"

"Someone's got to look after him. But you tell Lanya, you never got close to him, you stayed at the threshold. And I want clean blankets, and cloths. Now repeat what I've told you."

11.

Plumm examined the hut. Garan had fewer belongings than anyone she'd ever known. Most were castoffs from their farm—a cracked bowl, old baskets, a bag of nuts.

It didn't take long to find what she had been looking for. In a brittle old basket hanging from the rafters lay the swan skin: a sad and dusty thing. This surprised her, for she'd expected a hum, or a shimmer of air, or the scent of danger and magic (whatever that might be)—some hint of power resting within the white feathers. Still, Plumm dared not touch it.

She gingerly rehung the basket and set to work. She heated water and bathed Garan, covering him with the clean blankets that Warrent brought. She fed him broth when he woke, and put the place to rights as he slept—not that much was out of place. She gathered clean rushes to spread over the floor and set about making a straw pallet for herself.

The fever, as it turned out, was not contagious. The illness had gone to his chest, and he coughed (a horrible, strangled sound) even in his sleep. It was a matter of keeping him warm and, whenever he was awake enough to sit up, making him drink hot liquids to break up the congestion in his lungs. Warrent kept her well supplied, stopping by morning and evening. Lanya visited once, looked over the arrangements with a suspicious eye, and demanded to know exactly when Plumm would be back home. "I have enough to do without the extra work of sending meals down here," Lanya said.

"I can't say when he'll be well enough to be on his own," Plumm relied. "But don't worry. I'll be home as soon as I can. If you send some mending down, I'd be glad to keep my hands busy."

Plumm stood in the doorway and watched Lanya make her way along the path up the hill. A low voice behind her said, "I'm sorry for the trouble I've put you to, mistress."

"Lanya is not as harsh as she sounds," Plumm said, pulling a rough stool up next to the bed. "It's just there's a lot of work on her shoulders, and I'm not there to help her."

"But this is poor housing in return for your kindness."

"Only for a little while. And it's a change of scene. You'll be well soon, although you'll have to take things slowly for a while until your breathing's easier."

He closed his eyes, and she thought he'd drifted off to sleep until he spoke again.

"Still, I would like to thank you in some way."

"Then tell me how you came here, and what happened to the other swan."

There. It was out in the open. He hesitated. Plumm reached up, lifted the basket off its peg, and put it down on the floor between them. The swan skin lay crumpled within, downy feathers curling at the slightest current of air. Garan reached for it, then stopped himself.

"She flew away."

"And why did you not follow? I thought swans mated for life."

He coughed, a wracking, wrenching spasm that gripped his chest. When it had passed, he answered, "I did not want to remain a swan."

12.

Garan had been an armorer in the service of the lord of Huret, he told Plumm, as his father had been before him. His hands were strong and clever, and in times of peace, when there was less need for new swords and helmets, he turned his craft to fashioning hearth tools and other useful objects: a poker with a coiled handle, tongs like a pair of claws, a footed stand for an iron kettle. The wizard Camir, who also served the lord of Huret, admired his skill.

"Make me an ironbound box," he had said to Garan, "the size of a blanket chest." And Garan took a large box made of oak and reinforced it with iron. As he cut and hammered and etched the metal, he thought of the wizard's young wife. Perhaps this blanket chest was for her. She had come to his workshop several times, young Doura, and they took a liking to each other that soon deepened

Her father had given her to the pale haired wizard too young, and she was unhappy

He made the box as pleasing to look at as it was strong, with intricate curls and whorls of iron shaped into sinuous, entwining animals

Camir had Garan fit the chest with a heavy lock. But the armorer was a curious fellow, and what Camir did not know was that Garan had cut a second key

13.

Plumm listened to Garan speaking softly in the darkening room The draft of swan skin lay in its basket between them. She watched his hands resting lightly on the blanket, and wondered how it would feel to have them touching her. He spoke of falling in love, and she imagined herself to be that love, to be the woman he desired. It almost seemed possible, as she sat in the shadows, to transform herself as surely as Doura had slipped on the swan skin and flown away from husband, home, and kin.

14

Garan continued his tale: Doura had come to his workshop one day, troubled. She told Garan that she had seen a great swan with beating wings enter Camir's window and heard the clatter of the ironbound chest being shut and locked When Camir had emerged, a single white feather lay on the floor, but no other sign of the swan remained

"I have to see what is in that chest," she said to the armorer "What kind of man is my husband?"

"You've always known he was a wizard," said Garan

"It's one thing to cast a luck-spell over my lord's spear, or to find a missing arm bracelet," said Doura, "or even to tell the future But it's another thing altogether to share a bed with a man who can turn into a beast." She shuddered

They ventured into the wizard's room when he was out hunting, opened the chest, and found two swan skins.

"So soft," whispered Doura, stroking the downy feathers Garan said nothing, but cupped her face in his hands and kissed her.

But they heard Camir's voice in the hall; he had a short temper and a reputation for vindictiveness. Quickly, they cast the swan skins over themselves, burst out of the window with a flurry of feathers, and flew away in fear for their lives

And Garan had the oddest feeling of regret, for he knew Camir would destroy the ironbound chest he had labored over for so long

15.

After sunset, when she was sure Garan was exhausted and would sleep a long time, Plumm picked a spot up the hill away from the cottage, built a bonfire, and burnt the swan skin in its brittle basket

Plumm tried not to think as she fed the flames She tried not to think of what Garan would do when he found the swan skin missing and the ashes of this fire. The burning feathers gave off an acrid smell that made her eyes tear She tried not to think of how it had once enveloped his body, hollowed his bones, reshaped his limbs and neck and head under a layer of soft feathers The sound of the crackling flames was like the beating of great wings. She tried not to think of Doura, somewhere in the north, waiting for him to slip on the swan skin and follow her. Sparks flew up in flocks, like birds rising. She tried not to think of how she would face him in the morning. The heat beat at her face, but she dared not turn away and let even a single feather escape

She was freeing him from a curse—but would he see it that way? Would he understand that she loved him?

She tried not to think of all these things as she poked at the fire and let air in the bottom to help it burn hotter and faster. The ashes were white-hot, then glowing red, then gray.

The wind shifted and sent the last wisps of smoke toward Garan's cottage. As she followed its course with her eyes, she saw him leaning under its eaves Plumm knew by the slump of his shoulders and his lowered head that he would never forgive her.

Garan waited The fire burned out; she stirred the ashes until there was nothing left to burn. Not a scrap of skin, not a feather, not a quill Still he waited, coughing now and then, propped up against the corner post of his cottage Plumm wondered how, sick as he was, he remained upright. She walked down to him; she knew he could smell smoke on her hair and skin She felt unclean.

He blurted out a single word. "Why?"

Plumm couldn't meet his eyes "You're free now You don't have to go back"

"Free! Trapped, you mean."

"No I don't know what you mean I only know that I—" She looked up at him and her courage failed her His face bore such a look of grief and loss that if she told him she loved him and his expression did not change she did not know how she would be able to live with the knowledge. Plumm could only stammer, "I—I wanted you to be free of it all I thought you wanted it too."

"If she flies away, how can I follow? If she's out on the marsh, how can I reach her? How can we talk?"

"You weren't going to— She couldn't say it *become a swan again*

"How else?"

"But—"

"I thought you understood," said Garan "All I've ever wanted was Doura I've been waiting for her."

Plumm choked and ran up the hill, past the ash heap, into the night She couldn't see her feet in the darkness· the ground seemed to rise and fall in unexpected ways. She tripped, sprawling across the path, then wrapped her arms around her knees and wept; and waited, shivering, for moonrise to show her the way home

16.

The shorter days brought the first migrating flocks It was a busy time at Marsh Gate Farm as well, what with the harvest and getting stores ready for winter. Garan had little time to spare, but this one afternoon he managed to slip away and come down to the marsh while it was still light. The frogs were silent, safe in their mud beds till spring. The tide was out, and the air brackish

A swan silently glided past, giving no sign of recognition. He ran to the water's edge, calling, "Doura!" but the swan, startled, took flight

Over the next week he watched the marsh from his vantage point on the hill, looking for the solitary swan, learning its habits. He was sure it must be Doura. Some impulse, some shadow of a memory must have compelled her to return. But without the swan skin, how could he reach her? Garan cursed Plumm and her jealousy.

The swan was thin and undernourished· the long flight south had exacted a price Garan left grain by the shore for her. She found it soon enough Once he was sure the swan had developed a taste for the grain, Garan positioned himself nearby, not too close, and waited, motionless. He could see her peering out between the reeds

It took several days before the swan ventured on shore with him in sight. And several more before she ate the grain with him sitting close by, a net he'd stolen from the farm at his right hand. Back at his cottage he'd practiced casting the net until he was sure he could do it right He knew he'd have but one try

The swan came close to him now, lured by the easy meal and unafraid of the familiar, still man

With a sudden twist, he flung the net over her and dove to catch the ends and pull them under her feet. She squawked and bit the net and struggled, but Garan was too strong and the net too confining. "There, now," he said, "you've nothing to fear from me." He wrapped her close in its heavy folds and carried her up to his cottage He could feel her trembling underneath his arm.

Once inside, Garan opened the net just a little. Her head came snaking out and she bit his hand, hard

"Damn!"

He reached in, his hand following the long throat down to its base, and searching farther down the chest, to the spot over the breastbone, that certain spot that would not be there if this were a

real swan But there it was. His hand slipped under the skin and he tugged

The swan cried out in a voice half swan and half human. He ripped open the swan skin and it slipped off easily And there, in the net, lay Doura, terrified

17

The wizard Camir had found it a hard season, to serve the lord of Huret. He kept his own counsel and watched the women of the household with suspicion, for Camir now saw in all women the seeds of betrayal. He was quick to suppose himself scorned at every turn. Time and painful loneliness did not make him more forgiving.

And then it came: the sign he had been waiting for all these long months. Camir knew the exact moment Doura was free of her swan skin, for he had bound her to him on their wedding night with three strands of her hair left behind in the marriage bed that he'd tied with red thread and knotted with spells. As long as he kept this token of her in the pouch he wore beneath his shirt, and as long as they both kept human form, the miles between them made no difference He knew where to find her as surely as the rain finds the ground. He gathered the things necessary for a long journey—his pack and bedroll, food stores, his bow and quiver, the tools of his trade—and set off at first light.

Deep in his pack lay the skin of an osprey, one of the great sea eagles. Earlier that year, he had stolen the chick from its nest, and tenderly hand-raised it until it was grown. Then he'd killed it and cured the skin with spells both difficult and distasteful (as he had done with the swan skins), making ready for the time when he would hunt his wife. But it was too soon to assume the osprey's form That would come later

18.

"You're in rags!" Garan exclaimed as he bent to help Doura up But she hissed and shrank away from him, discovering in that moment her changed body. She held out her hands splayed, examining them with an amazed disgust.

As he watched her take stock of herself, all of herself that she could see (feet, arms, chest, knees, hands), he murmured, "It's all right, you're safe now. It will all come back to you We just have to be patient."

Yet he was deeply shocked. Her red hair was matted and streaked with gray; she was bone-thin, her eyes hollow and her cheeks gaunt. Whatever she'd met up there in the far north, it had not been kind

He crouched before her, trying to catch her eyes, but her gaze slipped away. "Doura, do you know me? Try to remember!"

She looked into his eyes a brief moment—he could see no flicker of recognition—then she returned to examining her hands, touching one with the other, each touch followed by a little shiver.

Garan had little spare clothing to put her in. He'd have to rely on Plumm's help, for Doura's presence must be kept secret. Plumm might not help him—she had kept her distance since the fire—but Garan could not see any alternative He was willing to use her if he must

Until Doura learned to pick up and manipulate small objects, he would have to feed her by hand. At first she would not let him touch her. But he was patient, and he sat with broken bread in his upturned palm until, starving and curious, Doura came to him and allowed him to stroke her hair while she ate. When he held the cup for her to drink, she sipped, then instinctively stretched her neck, tilting her head back to swallow. She watched him with dark, questioning eyes that gave him hope that some human intelligence lingered But as the days wore on, hope failed.

19.

"My word, look at you!" Plumm exclaimed at the threshold. Doura crouched in the corner farthest from the door, a rope knotted around one ankle and fastened to the heaviest hearthstone For clothing she wore Garan's spare shirt, which hung like a dress on her thin frame. Her face was smudged with dirt, for she had been lying on the floor by the gap at the bottom of the door, the better to sniff the marsh air In distress at Plumm's entrance, she waddled back and forth along the far wall Garan was at her side in two steps, stroking her matted hair and soothing her with soft words.

"I had no idea ...," said Plumm, lowering her voice. "Does she understand you?"

"Just my tone, I think. Sudden movements startle her " He sat down slowly on the stool, watching Doura

"It might be kinder to have left her as she was."

Garan watched Doura settle into a wary crouch as he spoke. "If she wanted to be a swan she wouldn't have come back to me!"

"Did she come back to you, or to the marsh, where it was familiar?" Plumm knelt by him, sorry for his pain, sorrier still for the wild creature in human form huddled against the wall. "Garan, I have to say it I think she's too far gone Do you really think you can teach her to be human again? Do you have any idea where to begin?"

"I don't know. I don't know if her memories are gone, or just buried so deep she doesn't know who or what she is." He buried his head in his hands. "It's only been a couple of days. I have to try."

20.

Up at Marsh Gate Farm, visitors were few and therefore all the more welcome Warrent had brought home a fellow he'd met on the road from town. Maric was his name

"My husband tells me you are a hunter," said Lanya to the pale-haired stranger at her table. "It sounds like a lonely trade, off in the woods on your own all the time " She was in a good humor, for Warrent had hung a fat pheasant in her store room, a gift from their guest Luckily they had a fine chicken stew on the fire, rich with lentils, onions, and wine. She'd added a handful of raisins from the harvest to sweeten it With an extra mouth to feed, there'd be none left over Still, thinking of the pheasant with satisfaction, she figured she'd gotten the best of the bargain

"I think of hunting as more of an art than a trade, mistress," said the hunter "The forests are so full of life, I never feel alone And there's the weather to watch, and scents to follow But there are times one longs for good cooking and feminine company."

Lanya beamed "Have some more chicken," she said.

Plumm paid little attention as she nursed her stew. How could she get more necessities to Garan for Doura? Lanya would not take kindly to a plundered storeroom or missing clothing. She'd risked enough in that line already She wondered what Garan was doing now Even more, she wondered what he saw when he looked at the strange creature shut up in his cottage How could he help but compare her to what she once had been?

And Doura, not-woman, not-beast, penned in Garan's hut. it could not be good for her, to be shut up so.

"Plumm can tell you She was the first to get a proper look at them," said Warrent

"What?" Plumm looked up at the sound of her name.

"I was asking," said Maric, "if there were swans down in the marsh " The hunter smiled as if to set her at ease, but Plumm felt there was something forced about it. He seemed curiously intent. It put her on edge.

"And I told him yes, you'd seen them," said her brother

"Last spring," said Plumm with feigned indifference.

"I saw one a week ago," said Warrent

"But it's a pity to hunt such lovely creatures."

"I'm surprised at you. You don't talk like a farmer," said her brother. "But come nightfall you don't mind a soft feather mattress."

"There's folks'd pay good coin for swansdown pillows." Lanya sounded angry, as if Plumm had taken the bread from the mouths of her babies by suggesting the swans be exempt from hunting

"It's not like there's a whole colony," said Plumm

"Their meat's tasty, too, from what I've heard, though I've never had it myself," said Warrent

"Only the cygnets," said Lanya. "Once they're older, they toughen up."

"We've meat enough without going after the swans," said Plumm. "They're so lovely. I think we should let them be, as we always have."

"The young mistress has a soft heart," said Manc, smiling. "But I'm a hunter, and where would I be if I only killed ugly animals? Each thing in its season, that's my motto."

21.

Plumm slipped away to the marsh after dinner Lanya grumbled, "Where'd that dratted girl go? There's no telling what she's up to these days. And with extra work tonight, too."

The hunter slipped out soon after, following the track down to the marsh. He knew Doura was somewhere ahead, although his sense of her was weaker than he'd expected. He spied the cottage built into the side of the hill and knew that Doura must be within. He drew back a bit, hiding his pack at the foot of a tree a bit off the path, and pulled out the osprey skin. Camir smoothed it with hands scarred by its original owner. One had to be quick to hand-feed a young osprey.

It was time.

He pulled the skin over him with one fluid motion and became the sea eagle, fast, large-talonned, powerful. He beat his wings and flew up the hill, circled, and glided down, settling into the high branches of a dead tree with an unobstructed view of the cottage. In osprey form he could no longer sense Doura's presence, but knew all he had to do was wait.

The cottage door burst open and Garan emerged throwing a large white bundle into the air. It burst into swan shape and made for the open marsh. Camir, startled, took off after it.

As an osprey, Camir worked hard to gain height. If the swan had been stronger, she would have outmatched him. But she seemed awkward, hesitant, uncomfortable in her skin. He climbed, flying over her, matching her stroke for stroke—then dove and struck.

She faltered, but shook him off with a scream. He fluttered wildly, trying to regain control. This bought her a few precious seconds. The swan widened the distance between them, but Camir had torn her shoulder and her burst of strength could not last. The osprey set himself to climb again. The swan wheeled left, hoping to find a way to hide herself in the tangled thickets at the edge of the marsh. She was too vulnerable out in the open. Her shoulder burned.

The osprey followed closely. Their two shadows skimmed the marsh as if they were flying side by side. But he was almost above her and readied himself to dive again.

He was set to strike, talons poised to rip into her neck, when an arrow took him under the wing and he tumbled out of the sky. The osprey splashed into an open pool and never rose again.

Painfully, Plumm circled back to see Garan, bow lowered, standing at the shore.

22.

Plumm, upon divesting herself of the swan skin, had a bloody shoulder. The swan skin, too, was torn and bloodstained. Back at the cottage, Garan bound her wound as best as he could, before a trembling, speechless Doura. Then he walked Plumm back up to Marsh Gate Farm.

Plumm returned the next day. She brought a sewing kit and mended the swan skin with strong stitches despite the pain it gave her shoulder. Garan sat close to Doura, stroking her hair and speaking softly.

"I don't want to do this, love, but Plumm is right. I can't keep you here like some sort of pet. It would be different if you had no choice, if you were simply hurt or sick. I would look after you till the day you died. But you do have a choice. You have another life waiting for you. What was it you said? Wind and water and sun on the grass—and no past to keep you bound. I'm bound to that past, but I won't be your jailer. I won't keep you shackled to me, though heaven knows I am tied to you, no matter where or what you are."

Although she could hardly see for her tears, Plumm knotted the end of the thread and clipped the loose ends. She smoothed the white feathers in her lap and thought of her brief time in flight: the open sky ahead, the curious sensation of height. It had been marred by terror, but it was a glimpse into the life that waited for Doura.

"It's ready," she said.

Garan led Doura down to the water. Plumm followed with the mended swan skin folded over her arms. The afternoon shadows were sharper, and there was a cold edge to the air already: winter lay in wait. But Doura's eyes brightened. She snuffed and looked around eagerly. Plumm passed the skin over to Garan, and he slipped it over Doura.

She changed before their eyes, shrinking and losing color at the same time, drawing in at the legs and stretching out at the neck until she stood in swan form at their feet. She immediately scrambled into the water and glided out of reach. She beat her wings and let out a low cry—whether it was of triumph or recognition or despair, they could not tell. The swan skin showed no seam or tear. She glided on a bit, then took to the air.

Plumm and Garan stood for a while in silence, even after they could no longer see Doura against the sky. Garan longed for some sign, some token, a backward glance that showed she remembered him. Even a single white feather left behind would do. But he knew there would be nothing.

"What are you going to do now?" Plumm asked.

"I don't know. Work. Stay here a bit and see if she needs me."

"I guess I'll do the same."

23.

Doura wintered in the marsh, keeping her distance. Garan left grain out for her, but it went untouched. It was a mild winter, for which he was grateful. He saw her, sometimes, as he walked down from the farm with the marsh spread out before him.

Plumm sometimes joined him on those walks, and gradually Garan came to appreciate her solid, comfortable presence. They would sit on the hillside in the thin winter sunlight and watch the sleeping marsh until it got too cold. Then they would climb the hill, Plumm chattering about chores, or the children, drawing him back to human concerns.

Doura flew north in the spring, and Garan never saw her again. Perhaps she found a mate and when the time came to fly south, she chose to go to his birthplace to raise their young. Perhaps she was too weak for the journey after all and died along the way.

Of the wizard Camir, all that remained was a pack, hidden at the base of a tree, that was never found. A few winters rotted the leather and curious squirrels took care of the rest. Whether or not they suffered ill effects from meddling with a wizard's pack—but that's another story.

Eventually Garan and Plumm found it easier to plan a future together than to imagine solitary lives apart. They married and went off to the nearest town, where Garan's skills as an ironworker were valued. Lanya objected to the dowry Warrent insisted on providing, but had to content herself with minimizing the effect of a wedding on her linens and pantry.

Garan's cottage at the edge of the marsh soon fell apart without someone to renew the thatch. After a few years, no trace was left behind, as if he had been in truth a swan and not a human after all. The winter wind howled over the marsh just the same. And, in town, sitting up late after Plumm had gone to bed, Garan remembered a girl with red hair and fear in her eyes, iron curled and curved over an oaken chest, and sunlight shining through white feathers. No trace left behind. He drew close to the fire at his hearth and wondered what earthly use his memories were.

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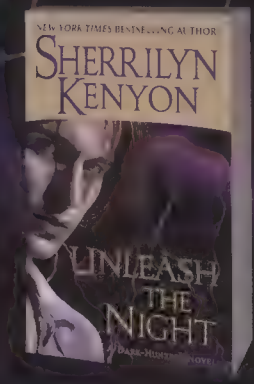

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THE

Is it better to meet your responsibilities or

ROAD'S

your desires? Should you do the thing you're

END

good at, or the thing you were born to do?

So close to the road's end, the traveler couldn't remember the beginning. The trail climbed the mountain, and all he could do was lean into the slope, one hand resting on his sword's grip, the other hooked behind the leather strap that held all his belongings on his back. His thighs burned, but he'd climbed so many mountains, walked so many miles, he knew how far he could go before rest. Every day presented more miles. Every day the horizon changed but remained as unreachable. Still, he walked.

The fingers of his sword hand stuck together. He raised them absently to his mouth and licked the wolf's blood. Sweat flavored it, and dust. The wolf itself lay dead in the leaves at the trail's foot. Of course, it was another legendary wolf he'd been warned about at the last inn. "Beware the Darkwood Killer," said the innkeeper, a young man with stout arms and no hint of a beard. "A hundred men have tried their luck. Don't go that path," he'd said.

"Only a hundred?" said the traveler. He finished his meal, thanked the innkeeper for the courtesy, then continued on.

How many wolves had fallen in the past years? How many years had it been? The traveler didn't know. When wolves didn't guard the way, other barriers arose. Bridges hid trolls. Ghosts haunted castles. Beautiful princesses with hearts of black hemlock waited in court. Caves held dragons. Rivers flowed and gurgled and whispered seductively in the moonlight, waiting for him to bend for an instant to listen. Roads possessed plans of their own, changing their turns, and they led him down evil ways. Or magicians cast spells.

The traveler sighed. One more step planted in front of the other. One more climbing effort up the mountain. Would a corrupted king wait at its top? Or a giant? Or a minor god?

By James Van Pelt

Illustration by Craig Elliott

A biting wind dropped from the heights. He pulled his cloak closer about his shoulders, and on the distant peaks, grey snow merged with grey clouds. Already he'd passed beyond the grain fields and vegetable gardens below, all the mundane farmers and villagers who hardly waved at his passing.

If they knew his name, they would crowd the way before him because his stories traveled much faster than he did, sometimes so changed he hardly recognized himself in them. "Tell us about the witches at Coverst Crest," one would say. "Did you really quell the

beast of Fordham Falls?" another might ask. "Can I see your sword?" a child with quivering lip would say. The fathers pounded him out to their sons or hid their eager daughters behind them. Other men, valorous men, nodded or raised an open palm when he passed. Gates opened. Lanterns lit. Musicians played. They pushed close for the stories. If they knew his name.

He'd grown tired of turning around, but he stopped for a moment to look down the climbing trail. Trees bent in the wind below. Smoke hustled away from the distant chimneys, and, beyond that, parts of the path peeked through the forest until fog hid it all. Where he'd been didn't matter anymore, except that sometimes the enemies came from his back. He shivered. Every step today seemed haunted with recognition. That tree! That red thrust of rock, bare on the hill! That small pond with trees leaning in just so! Perhaps he'd traveled so far that nothing new existed. Everything had crossed his path, and the world held no more surprises. Still, he walked on, because that was what he did, the traveler, pushing onward toward the heights.

To his left, scraggly brush that rattled against the wind gave way to ragged granite teeth and a rising slope to black bluffs. To his right, the mountain dropped sharply to a tiny stream cascading from one rock to the next. He thought about mountain creatures: bad-tempered long-horned sheep who blocked the way, or shag shouldered bears reaming on hind legs, their claws as sharp as nightmares, or mountain men who'd become more mountain than men with fingers that broke stone.

His hand tightened on the sword's hilt as he glanced from side to side. The old feeling, the familiar one tingled along his arms' coarse hair. Something waited or stalked or crouched somewhere on the path ahead. An ambush. An attack. A trap. Or was that it at all? The air had a tinge to it he recognized. The sun slanting through the clouds walked across the distant peaks in a strangely reminiscent way. But he moved forward. Whatever waited still waited, and the road's tyranny continued. He had to press on, although he couldn't remember exactly what it was that had started him on the quest, what long-ago undertaking took him from his home. Whatever the deed was, he'd accomplished it. That was clear. But what was it? Every act since had been to return home. Why had he left?

He shook his head. No, he couldn't recall. Had there been a stronghold long ago that was his own? The memory hardly seemed there. Tall walls that stood against the morning mists? A gate? He pictured an intricately bricked arch and solid columns, a sandy path between. And there was music.

But what was that? A memory? A dream? A wish?

The trail curved around the mountain's shoulder. His boots ground gravel into the dirt. His breath came heavily and measured. These were things he could sense much more than troubling whispers of nearly lost times. Believe in the road, he thought. Believe in the next heartbeat. The mind should be empty, like a bowl. Empty and aware, or the enemies will catch me in my distraction. All reflex.

Something flicked by the corner of his eye. With a snarl, he snapped his sword around, felt the slight contact, then stood at guard, balanced on the balls of his feet, hands away from his sides. The mountain's pulse, it seemed, seized for a moment, but nothing else stirred within his sight. The trail curled away as before. A gust of wind hurried over scant grass, bending it down, whistling through his ears, carrying the dry scent of pine before it calmed.

Finally, he looked at his feet. A small grey bird lay in the dust, cleft into two parts, a splash of blood across one extended wing, a scattering of feathers quivering in the air, a bent claw extended and clenching up as if to grasp a branch. Just a bird. But the feeling that a trial waited ahead didn't leave him. If anything, the feeling grew stronger like a thickening in the air. He wiped the blade clean, left it unsheathed, and then stalked forward, each cautious stride revealing a fragment more of the unknown path. The top of a tree peeked over the hill, then gradually, branch by branch, revealed itself until the whole tree stood rooted to the mountainside. As always, landscape unfolded before him, slowly, oh so slowly, his sword tip arcing before him like a steel finger with each step, until from around the hill his trek revealed a man standing astride the trail a stone's throw away.

The traveler continued toward him. The man's shield showed use, and his sword's grip was worn and practical, not decorative. He wore no helmet, though—his face showed no lines, and his dark hair reminded the traveler of his own before age had grayed it. The man's arms were crossed on his chest, well away from his weapons.

"Well met, stranger," said the traveler, lowering his sword.

"I expected you long ago." The man's voice carried clearly. "We've waited."

Nothing moved in the trees ahead, and they were too far away for even a skilled archer to reach him. No rock or bush close by seemed

THE TRAVELER SHEATHED HIS BLADE. "I AM EXPECTED?" HE LOOKED AGAIN AT THE TREES AND THE TRAIL'S SHAPE. ONCE AGAIN, THE FEELING THAT HE'D BEEN ON THIS ROAD BEFORE STRUCK HIM.

big enough to hide an accomplice, and the traveler couldn't smell horses or men in the wind. Still, he stepped off the trail so he would be above the stranger as he approached. Even in a sword fight, height gives an advantage.

The traveler sheathed his blade. "I am expected?" He looked again at the trees and the trail's shape. Once again, the feeling that he'd been on this road before struck him.

"Long expected. Long missed." The younger man's gaze was steady. His posture was poised, too, competent and prepared.

For a moment, they faced each other without speaking. The traveler puzzled the comment. At last, he said, "Missed by whom?"

"My mother," said the young man, "and me." For an instant, an intervening cloud blocked the beams of sun that had dressed the mountains behind the man, then it shifted again, and a shaft of light lit a mountain peak as if it were on fire. "I've never known you, father," the young man said.

The traveler sighed. Of course, he could see it now in the young man's face, the curve of his cheek, his mother's eyes. When the traveler had left so long ago, there had been a baby. He recalled now, dimly, a last embrace, a kiss on a baby's head, before shouldering his pack and setting out from his home. He looked past the young man, his son, and remembered that the path would curve one more time. His holdings would open out before him then. The small fields of hardy mountain produce. The farmer's huts, and, behind them, his stronghold, rising out of the mountain's native stone, like a rock formation.

"I am sorry for my long travels," he said. "Lead me home."

After the curve, the trail spilled into a long and narrow valley, much as the traveler recalled, although it seemed there were fewer huts, and the buildings were more aged. Weather stained their wood walls. The thatching sagged on the roofs.

A farmer paused in his digging as they passed, his face a blank page. The traveler nodded in his direction, but the farmer had already returned to his work.

The stronghold, though, stood even stauncher than he had envisioned. From the high parapet two flags snapped briskly in a wind that didn't touch him as he approached the stone archway. The traveler's hand brushed against the smooth wall, so sobd and cool against his knuckles, and he suddenly remembered running past this wall when he was a boy. He shrugged his shoulders in bewilderment. A boy? It had been so long since his life had been anything except the road and the weary walk.

Beyond the arch, through the thick battlements, a courtyard opened before them, and where the sky wrapped from horizon to horizon before, now the walls dominated, relegating the sky to a much smaller square overhead. Grey stone. Sturdy buildings marked with decorated wooden doors. A closed in smell that brought back a hundred new memories. Wood smoke. Stabled animals. Wet hay.

Across the courtyard, a well appointed elderly woman, flanked by two spearmen, waited for them at the foot of the broad stairs that led up to the Great House. As he approached, he could see that she knew him. Her posture, already balanced, became even more regal, but she trembled slightly, and ventured a step toward him that she immediately took back.

He stopped before her. In the brief instant before she spoke, he saw within her lined features the young woman he'd left so many years ago.

"Husband," she said.

"Wife."

Their embrace was long. The traveler smelled the remembered perfume, the sweet underscent of her skin. Her tears dampened his face, and for a moment, all the years dropped away. They were young again and courting, when she had teased him from horseback, outracing his own horse on the windy forest trails she knew so well, when she beckoned him to sit at streamside, and they talked long and earnestly about their lives to come; and when she danced in the Great House hall, far surpassing the other women who once vied for his attentions. For the moment of the embrace, the world became her, and he realized the dampness on his face was his own tears too.

So he did not object when the servants took his sword to hang above the Great House fireplace, or gave him new, fine clothes to replace the road worn ones. Nor did he object to the welcome home feast where his grown sons toasted to his good health and then returned the ruler's scepter, or when his wife led him up the stairs they had walked so many years before to the wedding chamber. It seemed he floated, now, so much weight had disappeared.

But much later, when the only sounds in the Great House were the skittering of mice and the familiar pulsing throb in his ears, the traveler roused himself from the bed and padded barefoot to the open window overlooking the courtyard. A full moon showed brightly on the well-swept walk from the archway entrance. Quartz or mica flecks in the stone caught the light so that the path looked more like a river than a road. It flowed from the entrance, through the courtyard, and then emptied into the darkness of the stronghold's backdoor, a little-used exit barely wide enough for a man and the belongings on his back. He stared at the shadowed door for a long time, the evening breeze washing over his nakedness until goose bumps roughened his skin. The light seemed to gravitate to that spot as if the courtyard were tilted. What was it that drew his gaze there? Behind him, the bed, so much softer than most he had slept in in his journeys, beckoned. His wife, still the young woman in her heart, still in love with the young man in his, slumbered deeply there, waiting for him even now.

But there was the mysterious door.

He leaned against the window's sill so he could see it better. Moon light touched his hands and face. Then, he remembered. He pictured it: his hand reaching out, unlatching the heavy bolt, all those years ago. His quest began there where the road led him from enigma to revelation, and from danger to triumph, over and over again. That's where he had started, his wife's last caress fresh on his lips, his sword untested and keen in its sheath.

Who was that young man then? The traveler felt that he knew *of* him, but he didn't know him, just as he knew *of* the son who had spoken so loudly for him at the dinner that evening, but he did not know him, not like a father should know a son. Nor did he know the woman in the bed. Not really. She was like a story told to him about another woman, another man's wife. A romance he learned about. Not his.

He shivered. Was the stronghold even a part of him?

A hazy cloud passed in front of the moon, dimming the courtyard, so it almost disappeared, but the road seemed to glisten just as brightly.

The woman coughed in the shadows behind him as she rolled in her sleep. The traveler flinched. He didn't recognize her breathing. The stone sill beneath his hand felt rough-edged and unfamiliar. He rose on the balls of his feet. His hands drifted away from the window and floated at his sides, relaxed, ready to defend him. Without thinking, he moved away from the silhouetting window and into the room's darkest corner. There, he watched. Did the ornate arras that covered the far wall move, just a little? Could there be someone behind it? Quiet as the moonlight, he moved from one corner to the next, until he stood at the tapestry. It lay nearly flat against the wall, barely room for a sword to fit behind it, much less an assassin, but his heart still pumped as if he'd run a long race, and his mouth felt dry.

The woman in the bed stirred again. Her white hair wisped across the bed's covers, all light shadows and dark shadows. He crept around the room's door and into the hallway beyond where his foot encountered a pile of soft cloth, his old travel clothes. The shirt pulled on easily, as did the pants and much patched boots.

No less quiet than before, the traveler stalked down the stairs. The lay of the stronghold seemed less familiar every step he took. The shape of a chandelier surprised him. An unfamiliar draft caught him unawares. With some difficulty, he found his way to the Great House fireplace and retrieved his sword. When he held it, its weight pushed him down just enough that he felt he was touching the earth again. He remembered the quick flick of his wrist earlier and the bird cleft in two, and he smiled sadly at the thought. For good or ill, the sword was a part of him. Not like this strange fortress that reeked of memories and people who did not know him.

He moved now with purpose, across the Great Hall to the throne room where he found the scepter on the high seat where he'd left it. Like a ghost, passing through one dancing-dust moonbeam at a window and into the next, he wandered until he found his son's living quarters, marked by a sign above the door. The traveler leaned the scepter against the polished wood. It looked better there than in his hand.

Minutes later, he stood at the small door he had seen from the wedding chamber window. The latch lifted just as heavy as he remembered, and when the door swung open, the trail glowed like the brilliant face of the moon overhead. He shifted the sword into a more comfortable position and began walking.

Trees passed, and so did rock and hillock and a thrushy dell. Finally, the road returned to the climb he had started earlier that day. Before him, the not so distant peaks caught the moonlight in their teeth and did not tremble, nor did he. The path led to them and through them and passed beyond. He leaned into the ascent, his thighs burning familiarly.

So close now to the road's beginning, so comfortable in the long strides that would eat the miles, so aware of his legs moving him forward, always forward on his comfortable journey into the unknown, he realized the road had no end, and he was content.

Uncle Vernon's LIE

By Patrick Samphire
Illustration by J.K. Potter

"Your Uncle Vernon will only tell you one lie in your whole life," Benji's dad said on the day he packed Benji off for his summer holiday. "Watch out for it."

Benji's mum had had to stay at home to look after the baby, so Benji and his dad were travelling together on the bus to the railway station. Benji had never been away on his own before, and he'd never met his uncle, but he wanted to look brave in front of his dad, and he was trying hard not to cry, so he just said, "Okay," and that was that.

Uncle Vernon, Benji discovered, didn't use teabags. He used whole leaves that had rolled up into tight, almost black balls when they dried. He tipped a single teaspoonful into his teapot then poured in the boiling water. ("Always fresh, boiling water," he said as he poured. "Always.") Benji watched, fascinated.

Within moments, dozens of tiny bubbles had risen to the surface of the tea.

"Why are there bubbles?" Benji asked.

"Ah," said Uncle Vernon, leaning across the breakfast table. He had thick, white eyebrows, and these rose as he leaned forward, as though they were attached to the ceiling by strings. "Now that's a secret, but I shall tell you anyway. Then we'll both have a secret. Would you like that?"

"Okay," Benji said.

"Well," said Uncle Vernon. "There's a tiny little man wrapped up inside each tea leaf. When the boiling water hits the men, they scream. That's what makes the bubbles." He waggled his eyebrows.

Benji sat back, satisfied. He might have been young, but he wasn't stupid. *One lie.*

Uncle Vernon's house was large. It was made of old red brick, with gables and bay windows and a dozen chimneys that rose in two clumps like the exhausts of a clay rocketship.

A maze of gravel paths wound through the walled garden behind the house, between borders filled with tall flowers and thick shrubs. A single, closed wooden door in the surrounding brick wall led from the garden at the far end. Beyond the wall, Benji could see the tops of swaying trees.

The world can be a frightening place to a child who can't yet tell fact from fiction. It gets more frightening still when you finally can.

Benji was walking along, feet crunching on the gravel path as though he was walking on the crumbling shells of million-year-old sea creatures, when he heard humming from the bushes ahead

He stopped short. How could somebody be humming in the garden? Uncle Vernon was in his study No one else lived here. That meant it must be someone who shouldn't be in the garden. A stranger. Benji's teachers had told him never to talk to strangers. Strangers were dangerous.

He backed away. He would run back to his room, hide there.

And then what? Hide there all holiday?

If he had to

He turned and hurried away down the path.

Do you think Uncle Vernon will let you stay in your room all the time? He'll make *you go out and play.*

The paths twisted and turned and crossed over themselves Benji dared not look away from them, in case they writhed like worms in water Now the humming came from the left, then the right, ahead, behind as the path wound

When Uncle Vernon made him come out to play again, that faceless stranger might still be there, humming in the bushes, watching Benji with invisible eyes. Reaching out a hand. He would be too scared to breathe

"Doesn't matter I'll run back to the house again Every time."

He'd seen this bush before, hadn't he? Just a minute ago Maybe he had run in a circle. Benji didn't even know if he was on the right path. He couldn't see the house.

His parents' house in London only had a small garden, just a patch of grass, some concrete, and a single tree. This one seemed to stretch on forever, and there were too many places for a stranger to hide

The path swung suddenly around a high bed of lavender. Benji stopped

The humming was coming from just behind the bush ahead of him, a high sound, reaching up and down, up and down.

His throat hurt like someone had hold of it

The stranger was following him, slipping through the bushes

Benji stared around. He didn't know where he was. He didn't—

A girl appeared from behind the bush.

She was on her hands and knees, pushing a little toy fire engine before her Benji realised that her humming was supposed to be the sound of its siren

The girl looked up and stopped humming.

"Oh," she said

Benji's breath came back so quickly he coughed. The girl frowned

She was about Benji's age, eight or so, although sometimes girls grew quicker, like Matt's sister who was twice as tall as either of them, even though she was only eleven, so Benji figured the girl could have been a bit younger than him. Benji's dad had said that Uncle Vernon didn't have any children

"You don't look dangerous," Benji said.

"Hmm," the girl said.

"I was scared "

"That's silly What's there to be scared of?"

Benji didn't answer, although he wanted to say, "Everything," because everything was scary. Uncle Vernon's house, the wild garden, the silence, the hidden, dark corners, the strange lie Uncle Vernon had told

Benji squatted down in front of the girl. "What are you doing?"

She rolled her eyes "Putting out a fire What does it look like?"

"Where's the fire?" Benji asked

"It's not a real fire It's just a game " The girl sighed "Games get so boring, don't you think?"

Benji shrugged. He didn't find games boring.

"Who are you?" the girl asked

"I'm Uncle Vernon's nephew," Benji said.

"Oh." She half-heartedly shoved her fire engine a little further along the path then left it there. "That's good. Uncle Vernon needs a friend. He doesn't talk to me very much any more. I think he's worried that I might become too grown-up if I spend too long with him "

"Who are you?" Benji asked

"I don't really know," the girl said "Uncle Vernon looks after me. He's always looked after me."

"Oh," Benji said, then, suddenly, surprising himself, "I didn't want to come here. My dad made me. He said I was too serious." His mouth turned down. "I wanted to stay at home."

The girl looked startled. "Why didn't you want to come? Isn't it nice here?"

Benji looked around the garden, at the flowers and statues and the big house. It did look nice, like a painting, but it was also scary

"I didn't know it was nice "

She stared at him "You only like doing things you already know about?"

Benji looked down at his shoes "I get frightened."

She shook her head, and sighed. Then she looked up hopefully "Can you think of any new games?"

Uncle Vernon's car was old, smooth, and solid It looked like a matchbox car that had been blown up to real size and polished for a year. Everything was old around here. Benji had had to change trains a couple of stations from Uncle Vernon's stop. He'd had to get on a cranky old steam train Benji hadn't ever seen a steam train before, except on TV.

Uncle Vernon didn't have a TV. He didn't have a computer or radio or anything like that. So there was nothing to do except play in the frightening, old garden, and hope no one was watching out of the shadows They played every game that Benji could think of, but the girl had played them all before She did play them, but she never really looked happy

Dinner wasn't until nine o'clock By the time Benji and Uncle Vernon were finished, Benji was too tired even to yawn Uncle Vernon leaned backwards and stretched. His spine popped, one vertebra after another.

"So, Benji," Uncle Vernon said, "do you want to go up to the roof?"

Benji looked up at the clock. "It's past my bedtime "

"Hmph. Well, we won't worry about that There won't be any bedtimes here, only when you're tired. and I'm sure a boy like you doesn't get tired very early."

A spiral oak staircase led up through the house. The wood was dark and old, and it creaked beneath Uncle Vernon s steps From time to time, the whole staircase swayed. Benji walked as lightly as he could as he followed his uncle up

About half way up, Uncle Vernon stopped and bent over, coughing Benji waited while his uncle dabbed at his lips with a handkerchief. When he was done, Uncle Vernon winked down at Benji

"Not as young as I used to be."

The light had faded when they came out onto the flat wooden platform on the roof of the house. A big brass telescope on a tripod took up much of the platform, along with a deckchair and a coil of rope Uncle Vernon placed his eye to the telescope and peered up into the sky

"What are you looking at?" Benji asked

"The stars." Uncle Vernon glanced down at him. "Want to look?"

Benji nodded. His uncle lifted him up around the waist Benji squinted Normally, the stars were flat and small, like a faint scattering of powdered sugar on black paper. Not any more They were round, like tiny glowing balls, and deep They seemed to stretch back forever, in front and behind each other And they seemed close, too. He could reach out his hands and cup them like fiery cherries.

Uncle Vernon lowered him.

"A river of stars flows over the house," Uncle Vernon said. "You have to be careful at night. If you stand on your head while you're

outside, you might fall in and be swept away." He turned his eye back to the great brass telescope. "That's why I watch, so that I can see if any little boys or girls have been swept away and throw them a rope."

One he, Benji thought. *Only one.*

That night, after Uncle Vernon had tucked him into bed, Benji snuck down to the kitchen. He found the sharpest knife in the drawer, the one that glinted like the edge of broken glass. Carefully, he sliced open every rolled tealeaf and watched the tiny men run to safety, ducking under the back door and away. It took all night, and by the end, Benji was exhausted. But he was happy.

The sun got up early. By the time Benji had finished his cereal and gone out to play, it was well up in the sky and pouring heat down into the walled garden. The shadows were deep though, and although he peered close, Benji could not see what they hid.

An owl peered at him from a tree, its eyes following him. Benji shivered. He felt cold from tiredness, despite the heat. Every time his eyes drifted shut, he remembered the tiny men running away. At breakfast, when Uncle Vernon had made tea, Benji had been so afraid that his uncle would be angry at him. But all Uncle Vernon had said was, "No bubbles today?" and raised his eyebrows.

Benji's tired mind kept trying to trick him into thinking that things were moving in the dark places, hidden by leaves. He clenched his fists, tightened his jaw, and tried not to jump. His breath was quick and shallow in his nose.

This place was too scary. He just wanted to go home.

Something rustled in the undergrowth. Benji stumbled away, his face crinkling with the effort of not screaming.

A face emerged. Benji sagged. The girl he had met in the garden the previous day frowned up at him.

"Oh," she said. "It's you."

She showed a smile that quickly faded.

"Aren't you going to help me out?" she said.

Benji offered a hand and pulled her from the undergrowth.

"Thanks," she said as she brushed off the leaves and twigs and dirt. "The bushes like to hang on."

Benji gave the bushes a wary look. *A lie? The truth?* He didn't want to find out.

"What were you doing?" he said.

The girl frowned again. Benji could see the lines on her forehead even when she didn't frown.

"I've lost something," she said. "I'm trying to find it."

"What have you lost?"

Her frown deepened. "I don't know. I don't remember."

They looked all day, behind leering statues, in pools, on paths, in bushes. Every time Benji had to part the undergrowth or lean past a statue, he was sure something cruel would reach out and grab him.

Finally, when the shadows had returned and grown late-evening-long, the girl said, "You should go. Uncle Vernon will be worrying about you."

"What about you?" Benji asked.

"Oh. I'll just...just."

She shrugged and wandered away down one of the paths.

Benji's bed was the biggest bed he had ever seen. Four of him could have fitted in without bumping elbows. The mattress and pillows were full of feathers and soft, so that he sank deep into them. He felt like he was blinking out of a hole. The room smelled of mothballs and warm wood.

Benji could hardly keep his eyes open. He felt like weights were hanging from the skin beneath his eyes.

"You must have had a tiring day," Uncle Vernon said, smiling, as he pulled the sheet up to Benji's chin.

"Mm-hmm," Benji said.

"I suppose you've heard what people say about how cats sit on your chest when you're asleep and suck out your breath?"

Benji's eyes popped open. He had seen the cats lying in the sun on the kitchen doorstep. His heart trembled. He pulled his sheet a little further up.

"Yes..."

"Poppycock," Uncle Vernon said. "Complete rubbish. Those people don't know what they're talking about. You don't have to worry about cats."

"Oh," Benji said, relieved, but also a bit disappointed.

"No, it's the owls you have to look out for," Uncle Vernon said. "They'll suck out your breath, peck out your eyes, and feed your soul to the things in the dark." He shook his head. "Look out for them, that's all." He got up and crossed to the door. "Shall I turn out the light?"

"No," Benji whispered.

It had to be a lie. It had to be.

He listened to his uncle walk away down the corridor. Uncle Vernon coughed as he walked, a nasty, sticky, raking, wet cough that sounded like the coughs Benji used to get when he was a kid, the kind of coughs that just wouldn't go away.

Benji couldn't sleep. He lay there in his bed and listened to the owls in the corridor and on the window ledges, listened to their beaks rattle against the windows and their claws scratch on the floorboards.

"Let me go home," he sobbed into the pillows. "Please, let me go home."

It had to be a lie. The owls couldn't be like Uncle Vernon said. If they were, Benji didn't think he could ever sleep again. How could he sleep if he thought the owls could sneak in and climb onto his chest?

He pulled the sheet off and rolled to the edge of the bed.

It was a lie, but that meant that everything else Uncle Vernon had said had to be true. He would prove it was. Then he could sleep.

The floorboards felt rough beneath his feet. The room was filled with liquid dark so that he could scarcely see. Against the windows, hard beaks tapped.

Benji closed his hand around the door handle. Claws skittered in the corridor outside.

It had to be the lie.

He pulled open the door and slipped out into the corridor.

A white shape ghosted from the dark. Benji ducked and felt soft wings brush his cheeks.

Fear grabbed him and shook him like a rag.

He ran. His feet slapped on the floorboards and then the stairs. An owl screeched. Eyes shone like tiny moons.

Benji burst from the house, out into the garden. The gravel stabbed into the soles of his feet. Stars sparkled brightly above him.

He found a patch of grass and stood there, panting. He peered up. Were the stars flowing? He couldn't tell. *A river of stars,* Uncle Vernon had said.

The owls did not seem to have followed. Perhaps they were waiting in his bedroom, up on top of the wardrobe or on the curtain rail. Waiting for him to close his eyes.

He crouched down and placed his head on the grass, his hands flat on the ground on either side of his head. Then he flung his legs up and stood on his head.

The world turned.

Below Benji's feet, stars flowed.

He fell.

Desperately, Benji tightened his fists in the grass. He jerked to a halt. He hung there by his burning arms. Below his feet, the river of stars rushed on.

Benji kicked his feet. If he could turn himself, maybe the world would right itself. Tears fell from his eyes, down to the river.

Grass parted between his fingers.

"Help me," he whispered. No one answered.

His legs wouldn't go high enough. He was too weak to pull himself up. His muscles stretched and shook.

The grass gave way, and Benji fell, into the river of burning stars. The current swept him away.

A rope snaked down into the river. Benji flailed for it. He caught on and held tight as he was pulled from the river.

Uncle Vernon hauled Benji up onto the platform and laid him down.

Once again, the world turned, and Benji found himself lying next to his uncle's deckchair.

"Are you all right?" Uncle Vernon said. "Did you get burned?" He was busy coiling his rope again.

Benji sat up.

"I'm okay."

His tears were still falling. He reached up to brush them away. Gently, Uncle Vernon caught his hand.

"Did you know," Uncle Vernon said, "there are planets that are just made of water? The people in them are happy and sad, they love, they hate, they sing, they fight, they build the most beautiful things and the most ugly. They're selfish and generous and cruel and wonderful. They're just like us, and every tear we shed is one of their worlds. They only have the time it takes for a tear to fall to the ground to do everything, and then they're gone. Tears are never wasted, and you should never wipe them away. Be happy when you're crying."

Benji stared up at his uncle. "Is that a lie?"

"No. Of course not."

"I'm scared," Benji said.

Uncle Vernon nodded. "The world's a frightening place. But it's also wonderful. You can't have one without the other. You just have to go poking into the corners to find the wonderful things." He pulled Benji up. "The worst thing about growing up is that you stop believing things. A long time ago, I decided I would believe everything I could. That way, growing up wouldn't be so bad. Maybe I wouldn't have to grow up at all. Now, let's get you back to bed." He winked. "Don't worry. I never let the owls get into the bedrooms."

Uncle Vernon's study was at the front of the house. A wide wooden desk with neat piles of paper stood in front of a tall bay window. From there, Uncle Vernon could see the front lawn with its towering chestnut trees. He sat in there most of the day. Sometimes the piles of paper seemed to move around, but Benji had never seen him actually touch any of them. Whenever he had looked in, Uncle Vernon had been staring out those windows.

The front of the house would not work, then.

As soon as Uncle Vernon had disappeared off to his study, Benji headed for the back garden. He could never quite remember which path led where, but he knew that they all reached everywhere, in the end. Perhaps they were all the same path. Benji set off, feet crunching the gravel.

Butterflies swirled from flower to flower, their wings like tumbling confetti in the sunlight. The flowers were wild with color and intoxicating with scent. Benji found his pace slowing and himself drifting towards the flower beds.

He forced himself to keep going. It would be easy to stop by the flowers. But there were shadows in the undergrowth, and bushes that grabbed. His heart fluttered like the butterflies' wings.

The path led around a final curve, and Benji saw it in front of him. The door through the wall. Out of the garden. He reached for the handle, laid his palm on the cool iron.

"What are you doing?"

Benji jerked back and around. The girl was staring at him.

"I'm running away," Benji said.

"Running away?" Her eyes widened. "Why?"

"Because I hate it!" Benji shouted. He hadn't meant to shout, but now it came bursting out of him, he couldn't stop it. "I'm scared of it all. I'm scared of the owls and the men in the tea leaves and the river of stars. I'm scared to cry in case worlds come out my eyes. I just want to go home." He blinked. He wouldn't cry. "I don't mean to leave you on your own, and I don't mean to leave Uncle Vernon, and I know I promised you I would help you find whatever you've lost. But..." His voice became a whisper. "I just can't stay anymore. I'm too scared. It's all too horrible."

"You can't run away from the world," the girl said.

"I don't want to," Benji said. "I just want to get away from all of this. The rest of the world's not like this. It doesn't have all these horrible things."

"Are you sure?" the girl said. "Have you ever gone looking for them?"

Benji didn't answer.

"The world's full of magic and miracles," the girl said. She was frowning again. "They're everywhere around you."

"I've never—"

The girl shook her head. "It's true. That's why you're a child, so you can see and touch and know the magic and miracles. If you don't, what's the point of being a child? You might as well grow up."

She came along the path to him and took his hand.

"Yeah, some of them are scary," she said. "Some of them are dangerous. But things have to be dangerous when you're a kid. It's part of being a kid. Otherwise you're just an egg all wrapped up in cotton wool, blind and suffocating instead of being young. You have to believe in the magic and the miracles. You have to stop being scared."

"It might hurt," Benji said.

The girl shrugged. "It might. But it'll also be wonderful. And if you don't, you'll be scared all your life. In the end, you'll just wither away like a stick all burned up and falling into ash. Being scared hurts more than anything."

Spots of sunlight scattered across the gravel between them, like dust on water.

"I don't know what to do," Benji said.

"You have to choose not to be afraid anymore."

Benji stared into the girl's eyes. She stared back. He didn't remember when he hadn't been afraid. Except...now, he wasn't sure he was afraid at all. Not here.

"I'll try," he said, and it was as if until that point he had been a bird trapped in a net, afraid to move in case he broke his wings.

He smiled. The girl returned his smile, although Benji thought that her smile wasn't as happy as his.

"So," Benji said, his wings beating inside him. "Are we going to look for whatever you've lost?"

The girl nodded. "I always look. Every day."

"We'll find it. What does it look like?"

"I don't remember," the girl said. The corners of her mouth turned down. "I just know I lost it."

"Was it big or small?"

"Big, I think," she said. "It must have been, because when I think about it I feel very small."

"Then we should be able to find it, shouldn't we?" Benji said. "Come on."

They looked all morning until Benji started to feel hungry.

"Aren't you coming for lunch?" Benji said. "Uncle Vernon won't mind."

"No," the girl said. "I'll just keep looking."

Benji's stomach rumbled.

"Okay," Benji said. "I'll come back afterwards."

He turned and raced back to the house.

The food was already spread on the table: gently steaming bread, salads, cheese, soup, pickles. But Uncle Vernon wasn't there.

"Uncle Vernon?" Benji called.

There was no answer. Benji crossed the room and opened the door to the corridor. At the far end of the corridor was Uncle

Vernon's study The door was ajar

"Uncle Vernon?"

Perhaps his uncle had fallen asleep He was very old, after all Old people seemed to fall asleep all the time Benji hurried along the corridor. He paused for a second then pushed through into the study

Uncle Vernon was there, hunched up under his big desk

"Get down!" Uncle Vernon whispered the moment he saw Benji

Benji dropped to his stomach and wiggled his way across the carpet to the desk

"What s wrong?" he asked

"Shh!" Uncle Vernon hissed

Someone hammered on the front door. Uncle Vernon screwed up his eyes and hunched deeper

They huddled under the wide, heavy desk. Outside, there was silence

Eventually, Uncle Vernon said, "Take a look out. See if he's still there "

Benji inched his way up until he could peer over the windowsill A man was pacing up and down outside the house. He wore a brown hat and a long brown coat, despite the heat, and he carried a leather bag

"He's there," Benji said.

"Oh, God."

The man pulled a watch out of his pocket, looked at it, and shook his head

"He's going," Benji said.

The man strode off down the path, beneath the chestnut trees, to the road There he got into a car and, moments later, drove away

"He's gone "

Benji scrambled back to the desk and reached back to help his uncle

Uncle Vernon's eyes were watering, and his face was red. He started to get to his hands and knees, then stopped His chest spasmed, his back kicked, and he began to cough His whole body shook. He coughed and coughed, unable to stop His head bounced against the underside of the desk

"Uncle Vernon?"

Uncle Vernon grabbed a handkerchief from his jacket pocket and pressed it to his mouth

Eventually, his coughing subsided. He wiped his lips and then balled the handkerchief and shoved it into his pocket He crawled out from under the desk and straightened, throwing a nervous glance out the window

Benji stared at his uncle

Uncle Vernon caught Benji staring and gave him a watercolor smile

"Just a bit of a chest," he said

"What did that man want?" Benji asked

Uncle Vernon grimaced. "He's a doctor."

"Then why didn't you let him in?"

"In?" Uncle Vernon's face whitened "No, my boy That would never do. Doctors make people ill

"What do you mean?" Benji said "They make people better "

"They don't, whatever they might tell you," Uncle Vernon said. "They make diseases They make cancer and bad backs and ingrown toenails and colds and the Black Death and the dreaded lurgy Doctors go poking around looking for new illnesses They find someone who's a little under-the-weather and say, 'Ah-ha, you've got lung cancer' Then, ever-after, people have to suffer from lung cancer, and the doctor gets a medal or certificate." He shook his head. "I let a doctor into my house once, and he made me a new disease That's why I never let doctors in anymore " He glanced out the window. "Doesn't stop them trying Meddlers "

Benji considered that "The dreaded lurgy isn't a real disease," he said

"Ah!" Uncle Vernon leaned down. "Not yet, it isn't. Stay away from doctors, and it might never be. See?" He peered out the window again "Are you sure he's gone?"

Benji took his uncle's big hand in his own. "You can't be afraid forever," he told his uncle

Uncle Vernon smiled down at him. "What's that, my boy?" To Benji it looked like his uncle wasn't really smiling, not like he meant it.

"You can't be afraid forever "

Uncle Vernon cleared his throat. "Why don t we go and have lunch before it gets cold?" he said "There's cake " He placed his hands on Benji's shoulders "Don't tell your mother I gave you cake for lunch, or I'll never hear the end of it."

Benji hiked himself up onto his chair while his uncle heaped salad onto his plate

"Tell me something," Benji said.

Uncle Vernon's eyebrows rose "Something?"

"Something amazing," Benji said "Tell me about the magic in the world "

Uncle Vernon gave him an enormous smile. "I wondered when you'd come around to that. What to tell... Ah. Did you know that there's a big spring in the middle of the Earth? Well, there is A man has to go down there every month and give it a wind, otherwise the world would stop turning and everybody would fall off It s true There's a coil sticking up through my garden. I keep asking for someone to come and tuck it back in, in case something goes wrong, but you know what it s like trying to get things fixed One of these days I'll have to go and tuck it in myself Maybe you can help me."

"Okay," Benji said, then, "Is that true? Would we really fall off?"

"Oh, yes Have you ever been on a roundabout when someone suddenly stops it? Everyone falls off."

Benji stared with wide eyes. "Tell me something more "

They sat there for an hour while Uncle Vernon told Benji about satyrs who weaved stories into the air on their looms made of moonbeams so that children would have something to dream, and pools where every time you skipped a stone an eye was opened for the water to stare out, and the shadows that shadows cast when the sun turns its face away, and a dozen other hidden miracles that Benji had never seen

"I wish I could stay with you forever," Benji said

"For a while," said Uncle Vernon. "Just long enough to be young, not long enough to grow old " And he looked sad again "Now, why don't you go out and play? A flower has just opened in the garden. Every time a new flower opens, it lets out a kiss. If you hurry, you might manage to catch it before someone else does."

She was out in the garden, sitting on a stone bench from which carved faces leered Benji came around and sat down next to her She turned as he sat, took his face in her hands, and kissed him gently on his lips Benji's chest stuttered and stalled Kisses had never felt this way before.

At last, she released him

"I caught the kiss," she said "I wanted to share it. To say thank you. For helping me search "

"Thank you," Benji said.

She smiled "You taste like bees "

"Like honey?" Benji asked

"No Like bees " She jumped up "Shall we keep searching?"

The days passed, full of summer and life and miracles Benji listened to the tales the satyrs wove, and skipped stones on pools of silver, and played hide-and-seek with the shadows of shadows. He tucked the spring coil back down into the Earth and felt it thrum under his hands. And still they both searched for whatever the girl had lost

As time drew on, the girl's frown deepened "Why can't we find it?" she said, over and over again "It's big, I know it is "

Eventually, Benji's last day arrived. He rose early, before breakfast, and went down to the garden. The sun was low and cast long, feeling shadows across the garden from the trees beyond the walls.

The girl was curled up beneath a mulberry bush, frowning even as she slept. Benji touched her shoulder. She blinked awake. Her face was so serious, so down. But she smiled at Benji.

"Come on," he said. "Let's start looking. I'm sure we're going to find what you lost today."

Yet when the bell rang for breakfast, they had found nothing.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," Benji said. "I don't have to leave until two o'clock."

"Yes," she said. "Yes."

Uncle Vernon had made a pot of steaming, hot porridge. Benji could see the currants in it, and the pools of thick condensed milk. Uncle Vernon sprinkled brown sugar over it, and Benji watched the sugar melt.

After they had eaten, Uncle Vernon leaned back and patted his stomach. "Now that's what I call breakfast."

"Uncle," Benji said. "Who's the girl in the garden?"

"Her name's Aimee," Uncle Vernon said. "She fell into the river of stars and was swept away. I pulled her out forty years ago, and she decided to stay. Such a sweet girl. She brings me berries from the raspberry bushes every summer." He smiled happily to himself.

"She's sad," Benji said.

"Sad? How can she be sad when the world is full of wonder?"

"She is."

Uncle Vernon's mouth worked, but for a minute he couldn't make a single sound. He looked like he was going to cry.

"I showed her every miracle and all the magic in the world." His voice sounded empty, like an echo in an old bucket.

"Even so," Benji said.

Uncle Vernon turned away. "I thought she would never grow old." His voice was as weak as a winter leaf. He coughed, hawked something up, and wiped it away with his handkerchief. "Never."

Quietly, Benji slipped from the table and snuck out of the room.

Behind him, he heard his uncle start to cough. The sound did not end until Benji was halfway down the garden and the bushes had hidden the house from view.

The girl, Aimee, was sitting on the stone bench, crying. She glanced up as Benji approached.

"I don't think I'll ever find it," she said. "I've looked everywhere."

Benji crouched before her. "Do you believe in miracles and magic?" he asked.

Aimee looked down. "Not any more," she whispered.

"Then I know what you've lost." Benji took her hand. "Come on."

"Are we going to find it?"

"No," Benji said. "I don't think you can ever find it again. You just have to stop being scared."

He led her along the winding paths through the garden until they reached the door in the wall.

"I can't."

"Shh," Benji said.

He pulled open the door. A path led through the woods ahead.

"Go on," he said.

She glanced at him.

He nodded. "It's okay."

She gave him a smile, then turned, and walked through the door. Benji stood there and watched her walk away into the trees. Although she was walking away from him, she seemed to be growing as he watched. By the time she disappeared from sight, she was as tall as Benji's mum, and her stride had become determined and firm. She didn't look like a little girl anymore at all.

Uncle Vernon was talking on the phone when Benji got back to the house. He covered the mouthpiece with a hand.

"Why don't you go and pack?"

Benji hurried upstairs. When he got to his room he started to stuff all of his things into his bag. It didn't feel like he was going home. It felt like he was leaving. The feeling hung heavy in his throat and chest.

Part way through, he stopped by his window. From here he could see the front garden and the road beyond. A car had pulled up, and as Benji watched, a figure emerged.

At first Benji thought it was the doctor again, and he was ready to race downstairs to look after his uncle. But this man was different. He seemed to be made of shadows: he wore a long, black cloak that reached down to his black shoes, and a wide, black hat hid his face. He started along the path beneath the chestnut trees towards the house. When the man's cloak flapped in the breeze, Benji thought he saw dark wings flutter beneath it.

Benji shoved the last of his clothes into his bag and raced downstairs. Uncle Vernon was waiting by the front door. He had donned his hat and his driving gloves. He gave Benji a wink.

"If I didn't know better," he said, "I'd say you were trying to be late and miss the train. Eh?"

"I saw a man outside," Benji said. "He was wearing black."

Uncle Vernon's face softened, so that despite his white hair and wrinkles, he looked like a child to Benji.

"He's the raven."

"What does he want?" Benji said, heart hammering.

"I called him," Uncle Vernon said. "You were right, Benji. I've been afraid too long." He straightened. "The raven is a great doctor. He's not like other doctors. He doesn't make people ill."

"Oh," Benji said. For some reason, he felt sad. Things shouldn't change here.

"Come on," Uncle Vernon said, and led Benji out.

They drove to the station in Uncle Vernon's Bentley, sliding almost silently along the tree-lined lanes to the town.

The train was already at the station, puffing smoke-signals of steam into the blue sky. Uncle Vernon helped Benji up into his compartment and passed him the bag.

"Give your parents my love," Uncle Vernon said. "I miss them."

"Why don't you come with me?" Benji said desperately. "You could stay in my room."

"I can't," Uncle Vernon said. He smiled. "The raven's waiting to take my illness away. It would be rude to keep him waiting any longer."

"Can he do that?" Benji said.

"The raven can take it all away," Uncle Vernon said.

"I don't want to go home." Benji stared down at his uncle. A tide seemed to be rising within him. "I don't want to leave you."

Uncle Vernon kissed him. "You have to. Don't cry."

But Benji couldn't stop. Words tumbled from his eyes and fell to break on the stone platform. Uncle Vernon's mouth turned down at the corners. Benji thought his uncle was going to burst into tears too. Then his uncle suffered his shoulders. He gave Benji a wink.

"Don't cry. I'll see you back here again next summer. I promise."

Benji sniffed. He could wait that long. "Okay, then."

The whistle blew, and the train pulled away. Benji watched his uncle slip further and further behind, until the steam hid him from view, and Benji's perfect summer holiday was gone.

Benji's father was waiting at the station. They walked silently across the platform out to the car park.

"Sit by me," his dad said.

Benji slid into the passenger's seat.

"What he did your uncle tell you?" his dad asked.

The lie. Benji had forgotten about the lie.

He looked down at his lap.

"He said he would see me back there again next year," Benji whispered. "He promised."

"Yeah," Benji's dad said, and the word came out as a sob. "Yeah."

This time, neither of them even tried not to cry.

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ACCLAIMED ILLUSTRATOR SCOTT GUSTAFSON ENGAGES VIEWERS WITH TIMELESS RENDERINGS OF CLASSIC FAIRY TALES.

OLD-FASHIONED MAGIC

BY KAREN HABER

Portraying classic fantasy and fairy tale subjects while avoiding the danger zones of cliché, cutesiness, and caricature can be an intimidating task for any contemporary artist. Scott Gustafson gives fresh life and light to iconic fantasy subjects like Alice in Wonderland and the Cowardly Lion and makes it look easy.

His work has a timeless aura that also seems fresh and inspired. His paintings are filled to the brim with pattern and detail yet he never overpowers the main concern, his subjects. His artful composition and masterful use of color engage the viewer in a fresh appreciation of familiar fantasy themes.

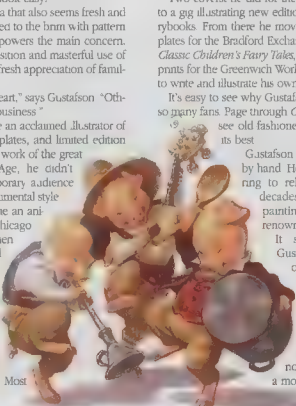
"I guess I'm a romantic at heart," says Gustafson. "Otherwise I wouldn't be in this business."

He didn't set out to become an acclaimed illustrator of children's books, collectible plates, and limited edition prints. Although he loved the work of the great illustrators of the Golden Age, he didn't believe there was a contemporary audience for work in that nostalgic, sentimental style. Instead, he decided to become an animator, and enrolled at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, and when that school closed, transferred to Chicago's Columbia College. It was there that he discovered children's illustrated books. "Until that time I hadn't seriously considered that field. But I saw that I could use a lot of what I enjoyed in animation—the characters, the subject matter—there as well. Most appealing to me was how integral illustration was to telling the story."

Although his interest was piqued, he continued to pursue his initial goal and split his freelance work between animation and illustration. When illustration began to dominate his assignments—and once he realized how much he enjoyed it—he bowed to the inevitable.

Two covers he did for the *Saturday Evening Post* led to a gig illustrating new editions of children's classic storybooks. From there he moved into painting collectible plates for the Bradford Exchange, which led to the book *Classic Children's Fairy Tales*, and then to limited edition prints for the Greenwich Workshop. Eventually he began to write and illustrate his own children's books.

It's easy to see why Gustafson's work has gained him so many fans. Page through *Classic Fairy Tales* and you'll see old fashioned romantic story telling at its best.



Gustafson casts his visual spell in oils by hand. He shuns computers, preferring to rely on the time-honored, decades-honed techniques of oil painting that have brought him renown for his work.

It seems appropriate that Gustafson is a proud member of that shrinking guild of artists whose members rely solely on hand skills. Perhaps a limner of romantic fairy tale scenes should spurn the computer and its modern technological wizardry in favor of a more old-fashioned magic.

BELOW: *A Mad Tea Party*. LEFT: *Three Pigs Dancing*.

ABOVE: *The Pirate and the Mermaid*.
RIGHT: *Gretel and the Witch*.

His choice is personal, not political: he learned his craft before the advent of Paintshop and other software aids. It doesn't seem to concern him. "I haven't made the transition to computers yet." However, he does have a Web site www.scottgustafson.com.

Gustafson's Greenwich Workshop print *The Pirate and the Mermaid* is a wonderfully romantic bit of fantasy. "A sense of ... story is critical to successful to fantasy illustration," he says. "You want the viewer to ask him or herself questions about it. Besides, I'm especially fond of old pirate movies."

"For *The Pirate and the Mermaid*, I started sketching mermaids, and then I thought, gee, what about a *pirate* and a mermaid? I just came up with a thumbnail. Then I asked myself, how would they come to this point? Originally, there were sleeping pirates scattered around, but that was a little too specific. I wanted to concentrate on the two main characters, so I pushed the other pirate activity to the background."

For *Merlin and Arthur*, Gustafson relished the opportunity to portray the famous mage. "All these legends suggest such marvelous images. And it had been years since I'd done a wizard painting. Inspiration came from *The Sword and the Stone*, which had a description of Merlin's workshop. For the lesson—lepidoptera—Merlin is bringing various butterflies to life instead of talking about dead specimens in a case. I inserted at least 25 visual references to the legend of Merlin, past and future, in the painting."

One of the ways in which Gustafson visually anchors his fantastic subject matter is through use of a local, natural light source: in *Goldilocks*, the artist relies on the window to provide light and the room recedes into dimness. He takes the same approach with *Merlin and Arthur*. The play of light illuminates the great wizard's beard and moves the viewer's eyes through the room.

"I want these scenes to appear to be real, to exist somewhere, even if something magical is happening here. If everything looks made up, then the thing that's supposed to be magical doesn't look as special," he says.

Gustafson's subjects are never completely at rest but, rather, caught in the midst of action or conversation: the Giant gives a sidelong smile as he strides through the fields, Tom Thumb brandishes his sewing-needle sword, the Tin Woodsman looks back over his shoulder to wave farewell. Gustafson's facility with form and motion is a legacy from his animation training.

"I've always been interested in characters' movements and facial expressions. It's interesting to import those into static illustration. I like the sense that the characters are about to move or have just moved. I like portraying the moment of rest or pause before or after the action was taken. I'd rather create the possibility of a lot of things about to happen, or something having just happened and the results about to occur."

Movement is a constant feature of the artwork in his own books. As author and artist of the delightfully whimsical *Alphabet Soup*, *A Feast of Letters* and *Animal Orchestra*, Gustafson keeps his critters moving: armadillo archers take careful aim, dragons proffer delightful dessert, frogs flip flapjacks, and koalas with pians for kumquats and ketchup bring a smile to children of all ages.

Among his influences, Gustafson cites Arthur Rackham (1867-1939), Maxfield Parrish (1870-1966), N.C. Wyeth (1882-1948), and Norman Rockwell (1894-1978). Parrish and Rockwell had an especially deep impact on him. "There was a rebirth of interest in the Golden Age of Illustration when I was studying art. We all grew up in the fifties and sixties and it was a very exciting discovery for us. Now those artists are well known, but they were a revelation to us at the time. I learned how to paint using acrylics, adapting the techniques of Rockwell and Parrish."

There are echoes of the Golden Age in the air of good-natured, innocent fun and glee that pervades Gustafson's work. It hearkens back to a time before irony and self-consciousness invaded the aesthetic soul of the illustration industry.

Some of that old-fashioned air is dictated by Gustafson's chosen medium, oil, and the burnished glow it can provide. "I took up oil eventually. When I worked with it as a kid it was beyond me—how to deal with a medium that took days to dry. Years later, in high school, I tried it again, in art class, and rediscovered some of the possibilities. When I got out of college I began to understand how to use the medium to its best advantage. But I've also used acrylics for some projects—the Alphabet book, for example. It depends on the project."

For reference material Gustafson relies on books and photos of models. He employs vibrant color but it is never allowed to dominate. Rather, it's often subjugated to pattern in his work. "Pattern gives a sense of order to the

details. There must be areas of things happening and then areas where the eye can rest."

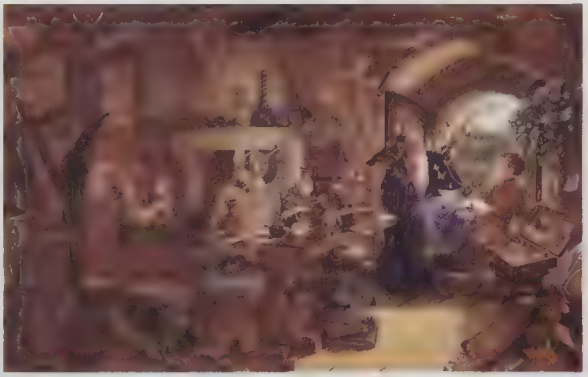
"For my preliminary composition, I usually decide on a couple of moments that are particularly good picture possibilities and then I begin to winnow that down in tiny thumbnails to what would be the most effective arrangement of figures. From there I do a sketch to show the publisher. I almost always use the earlier sketches for reference. They usually have the essence of the idea. There are times when I can go off on a tangent, and the earlier drawings can bring me back."

Finally, he works up a full-sized charcoal sketch, photocopies it, glues it to a Masonite board, and paints directly on the sketch.

There are many challenges specific to reinterpreting classic fairy tale and fantasy subjects. For example, Gustafson recently had to decide what sort of furniture Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother might own.

Inevitably, work that has established the characters in the past casts a long shadow. "I really jumped at the opportunity to do Alice in Wonderland. But I needed to remain conscious of the earlier Tenniel drawings. For example, you *could* put the Mad Hatter in a Napoleon hat, but the Mad Hatter has become known as someone who wears a top hat with a label reading 5 7/8. If I didn't have him wearing the hat he wouldn't look like the Mad Hatter, and the viewer *has* to recognize him quickly. And again, with the Caterpillar, he *has* to have a hookah and a fez. It was fun to elaborate on the smoke and have arabesques dancing around him."

"It's daunting and exciting to take on these classic tales," Gustafson says. "Ideally, the illustrations appeal to children and adults alike. That's my goal."



ABOVE: *Puss in Boots*. OPPOSITE TOP: *Merlin and Arthur*. OPPOSITE LEFT: *Little Red Riding Hood*. OPPOSITE CENTER: *Squirrel's Salad*. OPPOSITE RIGHT: *Advice from a Caterpillar*.

Dear Letters

When we try to make contact with old friends, we often don't stop to think if there is any room in their lives for us anymore—or in ours for them.

BY CHRISTOPHER BARZAK • FOR JENNA FELICE

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS COCOZZA

Dear Sarah,

I have heard of your great misfortune to have gone and died so suddenly. Now I find myself writing after so many years have passed between us in the hopes that perhaps this news is not true. For a long time I believed I was dead too. Then one day someone called me on the telephone. Alice. Do you remember her? Alice Likely. How she loved that girl. And I opened my eyes in a dark place, like a fairy tale princess trapped in a coffin. Light appeared suddenly, a flash so sharp and blinding it pricked my eyes and made them water. Anyone passing would have thought I was crying. I must have looked so sad.

And someone did stop beside me. I was still, trapped in that dark place, my body bagged in a sack of creasing, but thick, flesh. Light had ripped a hole in the darkness. Through that opening two hands reached in and gripped both sides of me. I sank. The hands pulled the gap wider and wider until daylight surrounded me, and trees sprang up row after row of them. Birds called out. Their notes pierced my eardrums like needles. I heard water, and then there it was—a stone fountain next to the bench I lay upon, and the birds perched upon the fountain's ledge stared at me, their eyes black and serious.

Whoever freed me disappeared before I could pull myself together. A newspaper lay open across my chest, and another on my legs. As I sat up and the paper on my legs slid to the ground, rattling, I held on to the section covering my chest and looked at it for a moment only to see your name glaring up at me, as if your name had a life of its own, had your eyes and the face you could give with them, and so your name glared at me in such a way that I could not help but notice it. It said you were dead. Twenty-eight years old. A promising young artist survived

by her mother and father Their names were listed as well, but it hurt to look at them. Particularly your mother's She never liked me and I still don't know why. What did I ever do to her?

I am writing in the hopes that there may still be a chance for us to reconcile, to come together, to answer some of the questions that have burned inside me since you said goodbye Why did you betray me? Whatever happened to our promise? And where have I been for so long, asleep and waiting for someone to wake me? Why didn't you do that? I don't even recognize my own body My legs are long and my feet are large When I peered into the fountain water, a face looked back that belonged to a stranger Then the fountain turned on again, displacing the water, and the face broke apart into ripples.

Now I am writing this to you Will you please talk to me? Can we forgive one another?

Love,
Alice

I am writing in a notebook stolen from Rexall's drugstore, the sort of book Sarah and I used in school years ago, for doodling and note-taking The cover of it looks like the black and white static on a dead television channel. "Snow," Sarah's father used to call that "Nothing but snow here," he'd say, flipping the channel until something lively and entertaining appeared He favored shows about policemen and vigilantes who saved the lives of people who could not save themselves from danger. He instructed the vigilantes and policemen on how to go about all of this saving-of-lives business, spouting advice from his reclining chair, waving the remote control like a scepter

Sometimes the vigilantes listened to him, sometimes they didn't But they always saved the helpless victims in the end

The pharmacist and his wife didn't recognize me But I didn't recognize them at first either. They are old and gray now. Mrs. Hopkinsey's face sags. Her teeth are not her teeth any longer I know this because I remember they were yellow and crooked and now they are white and bright and not so narrow, they line up in her mouth like good soldiers. She smiled at me. "Can I help you, dear?"

Such a nice woman, just as I remember. I told her I was browsing, and she nodded and turned back to shuffling cigarette packs into the storage bin over the checkout counter.

I walked the aisles slowly, touching candy bars, tubes of lipstick, barrettes in the shape of butterflies I spun the comic book rack and paged through magazines, but the women inside were strange and alien, their faces harsh, skin like plastic or velvet. Too smooth Their outlines blurred into the backgrounds. I found that a familiar feeling, though, and felt a stab of pity for the cover girl's blurry faces

The greeting cards stood on the same shelves that they always had; I picked through them One said, "I feel so lonely with you not here." On the cover was a picture of a little girl looking up at the moon, holding a doll at her side. Inside it read, "But we'll always be friends, no matter what the distance." I found myself crying, and stuffed the card under the waistband of my pants, covering it up with my sweater I looked to see if anyone had seen me take it, but Mrs. Hopkinsey still restocked cigarettes and Mr Hopkinsey stood behind the medicine counter, measuring out pills for a customer

If Sarah had been there, she would have been the one to take the card. I would have been the lookout Those had been our positions when we were children I felt a little guilty changing places with her, like borrowing a friend's sweater and not returning it, even though you know how she loves it so.

I found the notebook in the next aisle over I hadn't known I was going to take it either. I needed things without knowing what I needed, so I let my hands think for me. They reached out and took things the greeting card, several envelopes, the notebook, pens, a bar of chocolate, a ten dollar bill crumpled up on the black and white checkered floor I used the money to buy a soda and a bag of potato chips, so as not to be suspicious. Mrs Hopkinsey rang me up with her new smile still flashing, and when she handed me my change, I thought, *I am home*

Dear Sarah,

I refuse to believe you are dead. I myself am not dead, so it goes to figure that you are alive and well. The obituary I read must have been mistaken. Or else another Sarah Hartford exists and it is this other Sarah Hartford who has died Not you

I have seen the Hopkinseys, those dear old people, and they have changed enormously Do you remember how we'd steal candy and perfume samplers from them when we were girls? We were ridiculous, weren't we? And the Hopkinseys are such good people, I feel ashamed to have stolen from them. Why didn't we ever shoplift at the Hoffman's grocery store instead? The Hoffmans were snobs Missy Hoffman always thinking she was better than everyone because her DADDY owned the only grocery store in Kinsman, so she had "the whole town's money." How I wanted to punch that girl Luckily I had you to restrain me, to whisper, "Calm down, Alice, just ignore her She'll get hers someday." You were the one with

You burned Tom on the neck with a curling iron? Or was it Tom that burned you? You hit him over the head with a Mason jar that you filled with brushes? Or did Don do that to you? Someone had to have fifteen stitches. Someone called 911 to report an intruder.

Sometimes the vigilantes listened to him, sometimes they didn't But they always saved the helpless victims in the end

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your head about you, calm and collected, shoelaces tied, hair in place. No one could ruffle you. Not even Missy.

But what happened to change you? In the newspaper I read that you were murdered by your boyfriend. Tom or Don or Ron. Someone with a name like a mantra. Is this a true description? Did his name repeat in your head again and again, like Chinese water torture? *Don, Don. Don. Tom. Tom. Tom. Ron, Ron Ron.*

What an awful rhythm to be ruled by.

You were obsessed with Ron, I'm guessing, because you were always obsessive, with your paintings and sketches, with your neatness, the constant smoothing-over of your clothes with the flats of your hands, erasing imaginary wrinkles The way the part in your hair had to be perfect. The way you avoided cracks in sidewalks because of that nursery rhyme about mothers I figure you became obsessed with this man in a similar manner

Don abused you, the papers reported. In the past you had called the police on him. The two of you were noted for dramatic gestures. Did I read this correctly? You burned Tom on the neck with a curling iron? Or was it Tom that burned you? You hit him over the head with a Mason jar that you filled with brushes? Or did Don do that to you? Someone had to have fifteen stitches Someone called 911 to report an intruder By the time the police arrived, though, said intruder had vanished into thin air In the end you and Tom reconciled You smoothed out the wrinkles Then he killed you six months later and smashed up all of your paintings All the frames broken, the canvases torn with a hunting knife Such a violent imagination It is evidence like this that proves to me that the dead Sarah Hartford in the newspaper is not the same Sarah Hartford I once knew She must be your double

I am glad to know you continued painting. You had vision, I remember, even as a child But even so, with all that vision, how could you not have seen this coming? To me it sounds as though you

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stood in the middle of a railroad crossing, not moving when the yellow eye of the train appeared in the night, nor when it whistled a warning. I don't mean to say you allowed Tom or Ron or Don to kill you. I mean to say, how could you allow yourself to be with such a person after the first time it happened?

If I'd been around, I would have been the one with my head about me, with my shoelaces tied, and my hair in place. I would have led you by your ear out of Ron's reach, even if you struggled against me. This is a testament of my loyalty to our friendship. This is the reason why we need one another. For times like this, when we're not reasoning correctly.

Love,
Alice

P.S. You are NOT dead.

"Promise," Sarah told me. "Promise, Alice." And so I did.

"We'll always be best friends, and here is proof of it." I touched my fingertip to Sarah's. They were both bloody from pricking the skin with a needle a minute earlier. We rubbed our blood together until it mingled and Sarah signed, satisfied that the act was completed.

"Now no one will ever separate us," she said. "It's final."

A thrill sped up the length of my spine when Sarah said that. She was the only friend I can remember having. When we pledged our undying love for one another, I believed it in every part of my being. "I'm so happy you're my friend, Alice Likely," she said, smiling. I beamed.

But her mother came in a moment later. "What are you doing now?" she complained. Her voice sounded like knitting needles, clicking over and over. I didn't say anything. Sarah had warned me not to speak back to her mother. I was to keep my mouth closed, or else we'd never be allowed to see one another.

"I was just playing, Mom," Sarah answered.

"In the middle of your room? What's that, then? Give me your hand. You're bleeding, Sarah! How did you manage that?"

Sarah's mother led her into the bathroom to clean up her finger, all the while chastising. "What's wrong with you, Sarah? What am I going to do with you? You must go out. You must make friends. You're going to be thirteen next month. A big girl!"

"I do have friends," Sarah protested.

"Other friends," Mrs. Hartford muttered. "You mustn't hide yourself away only for the benefit of your dear Alice."

"I'm not hiding, Mother." Sarah's voice, harsher now, rising.

"Well, you certainly aren't making yourself much of a presence. Now help me hang the laundry. Make yourself useful."

Useful. One of Mrs. Hartford's favorite words. "What does it do?" she was always asking. "What use is it?" When the neighbor boy, Jimmy, started college as a Philosophy major, Sarah's mother asked, "And what will you do with that?"

Jimmy had stared at her for a moment, then shrugged and changed the subject to the weather. What a storm that was the other night, he told her. "Yes, a whopper." Sarah's mother agreed, without pressing him any further about the Philosophy major. "I expect it will help the corn, though," she said.

The weather. An awful part of my current circumstances. Though it is summer, it rained last night, and I was forced to seek shelter. My park bench provided no protection from the raindrops, warm as they were and welcome, as I've started to stink without a proper place to bathe. I finally stumbled into one of the baseball field dugouts, the home team side, and fell asleep on the cold concrete bench in there, with the sound of the rain pattering above me, and the smell of dirt from the baseball diamond turning into a thick, rich mud.

I dreamed of Sarah. She stepped down into the baseball dugout, kneeled beside me, and placed her cheek upon my stomach. I stroked her hair. How soft it was beneath my fingers. I almost believed I was awake and Sarah had finally come to me. When the sun broke through the night, though, and morning woke me, I felt a wave of sadness. I shivered, rubbing tears out of my eyes, for I had lost her again. Like the fog that hangs over the fields of the park, she had dissipated.

Dear Sarah,

I am very angry. Why will you not speak to me? Do you believe yourself above me for some reason? I'm not certain if you even read my letters. What should I do? Stop writing you? I will stop writing if only you would say so. Why don't you say so?

When I stroll through Kinsman, I often stop stock still in my tracks for strange reasons. Here I see you everywhere. In the school yard, the grocery store, or at the Rexall's. Leaning over a water fountain, pulling your hair from your face. Running through the town square, to the park, where you left me that horrible day, so long ago. Yes, I remember. Did you think I would forget the pain you caused me, or how it was inflicted? I was attempting to be the bigger person, but now I see you have changed indeed, and I no longer know you. The Sarah Hartford who was my best friend would never have answered my letters with silence.

I suppose your mother finally got to you. When I say your mother, I mean this town. When I say this town, I mean this town with its one miserable Main Street and its overabundance of churches. No more than three thousand people live here and yet there are fifteen churches that come to mind readily. What I mean to say is this town has you believing in its one-screen drive-in movie theater, its Dairy Oasis, its Wildwood Café with the admittedly fantastic coffee, its park that consists of a water fountain, trees, a baseball diamond, and cemeteries. Granted, the cemeteries are well groomed, and in autumn the trees light up with brilliant colors. But this town is not where you imagined yourself forever.

What happened to New York City? What happened to San Francisco? What about Europe? You said you'd die if you never made it to Paris. Now that I'm back, I discover that the only time you ever left this place was for a year and a half of college in Columbus. You never even left Ohio. Then Tom asked you to move in and you went to him. You went to him blindly, your arms outstretched, eyelids lowering. A sleepwalker.

That day in the park, it must have been fifteen years ago, you said you had something to tell me. You asked me to sit beside you on the bench near the water fountain. There were birds perched on the ledge of the fountain, dipping into the water for a drink, turning to stare at us, heads cocked at quizzical angles. Robins, I think, though I saw at least one blue jay among them, arguing. You said you loved me, but there was something you had to tell me. You said—

You said—

Damn you. Now I am crying. I can't even finish this letter. My hands are shaking so badly I want to hurt you. To hell with you, Sarah Hartford. Who needs you anyway? You are cruel, mean-spirited. Also thankless.

Signed,
Alice Likely (Or have you erased this name from memory?)

I've taken a job and found a bed to sleep in. I sell corn by the roadside. For every bag I sell, I can keep a dollar. I pick the corn every morning, while Mr. and Mrs. Carroll feed their livestock, fill up the water trough, milk the cows who have calves that won't suck, and attend to the children. They are a busy family, the Carrolls, too busy to check references, although I provided them. I am passing through on my way to California, where friends await me. Or so I have told them. How strange and liberating, this easiness in making up an identity. The Carrolls see me as a free spirit, a gypsy, someone from the 1960s, "new agey," according to Mrs. Carroll, who has a friend who reads tarot cards and burns incense, and knows about these things.

"How long do you need work?" asked Mrs. Carroll when I came into her yard. She was beating a rug on her porch steps. Dust spun in the air around her like tiny galaxies. She smacked the throw rug, then looked back at me for an answer.

"A few weeks," I said. "I just need to make some money and have a place to sleep for a while."

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E D S

THE DEAD, HE HAD DISCOVERED, HAD mouths and could speak, but they could not be heard

Or, they could not be heard by the living the dead talked among themselves with voices of sand and dust. Amenemhet did not wish to talk to the dead. A man who has been murdered wishes to speak to those still living, to lay testament before them, to give warning.

The dead, in their crowded voices, said that *Re* no longer travelled through the underworld each night. They said that his face was now no more than a ball of fire in the sky. There were no more demons in the underworld, no *Apep* the serpent, no *Ammet* the great devourer, no gates, no judges, no scales. There was no Land of Reeds.

The dead said *Amun-Re* died on the day the Macedonian usurper sat upon the throne of the two lands and proclaimed himself Pharaoh, for Alexander was no true son of *Re*, no true son of *Osiris* and so no god.

Perhaps, Amenemhet thought, they were right. All his life, he had studied the map that showed the path through the underworld and learned the words of the *Chapter of Renewing the Gates in the House of Osiris which is in Sekhet-Aanru*. After his murder, Amenemhet had watched through the eyes of his *ka* as the *sem* priest prepared his body and performed the sacrifices and as the *kher-het* priest read the prayers and instructions. All had been in order, and Amenemhet had felt his *ka* slip free.

But when night came, his *ka* had not entered *duat*. It had remained in the desert sand, and Amenemhet had become aware of the press of the dead around him and the whispers of their dry voices like the desert wind. "*Re* no longer travels the underworld at night," they whispered. "His face is but a ball of fire."

HE LEFT THE TOMBS AND THE DEAD behind him and walked down into the town. The narrow streets were busy with the living. Amenemhet passed easily through them, his *ka* as insubstantial on their skins as his words were on their ears. Other *kas* of the dead also moved through the streets. They stared at him with drawn, grey eyes. Amenemhet stepped around the dead, sometimes stepping through the whitewashed, mud-brick walls of the houses that lined the tight streets to do so.

Once, in the market, he shouted furiously at the living. "*Repa* Djau has murdered me. He slipped a blade into my throat and left me to bleed to death." But the living kept on their way, chattering and laughing. Amenemhet spat emptily onto the ground.

"They can't hear you, you know."

Amenemhet looked around. The *ka* of a child was standing behind him. She could not have been more than eight

years old when she died. She scarcely came up to Amenemhet's waist.

"I know," he said. "Go away."

Her *ka* held ghosts of colors. Specks of precious gold swam in her eyes. Most of the *ka*s he had seen had been grey.

"We could help each other," she said, scampering after him as he strode through the crowd. "I was poor and young. I never saw the maps of the underworld. I never learnt the words to speak at the gates."

"Go away," Amenemhet said. "Those things are as dead as *Amun-Re*. The Land of Reeds is no more. And what could you offer me?"

Amenemhet's house was on the southern edge of the town, a mile from the rich flow of the Nile, set among the estates of the wealthy. Amenemhet had been *hety-a* of the town, and all had been pleased to pay him court and to seek his wisdom. Now those same people saw him not and heard him not. The only one who paid him court was the *ka* of the wretched urchin who dogged his heels like a loose bandage.

"Something," the child said. "I have been dead for a long time. I know the world of the dead among the living. I know things."

"Go away," Amenemhet repeated.

A golden chariot stood outside the gate of his house. The sight of it plunged Amenemhet's *ka* into coldness. *Rep-a* Djau was here. With a roar of rage that did not even stir the dust in the air, Amenemhet plunged through the outer wall.

The murderer was not in the square court, but the door in the north portico stood open, and Amenemhet heard voices from within.

Amenemhet stepped through. *Rep-a* Djau stood in the center of the reception room, clad like a pharaoh in his green and gold gown and his bead necklaces. Baketamen, Amenemhet's wife, sat on an earthenware bench before *Rep-a* Djau. The two girls, Meryt and Kawit, and his little son, Hori, who was scarcely off his mother's breast, stood behind Baketamen. Baketamen had obviously been crying, but she had dried her eyes and looked up at *Rep-a* Djau.

"I have always been a good friend of your husband," Djau was saying. "He trusted me. Anything I can do for you, I will."

"Liar," Amenemhet screamed. "He always envied me you. It wasn't enough that he was richer than I, that he had the ear of the *Tjaty* of the two lands. He wanted you. He killed me. Don't listen to him."

Baketamen smiled. "You are kind, *Rep-a*. We will remember your kindness."

Djau bowed. "You may always call on me."

Then the murderer turned, and strode out of the house.

When Amenemhet finally thought to look, the *ka* of the troublesome child had gone.

THE SERVANTS DID NOT COME THE NEXT day. When Amenemhet's *ka* searched through the house, he found his wife sweeping the sand from the floor. With every stroke of the brush, a tear fell from her face onto the sand to be lost in the water she had sprinkled there. His children, even little Hori, were building a fire from dried dung. When he had been alive, they had burned only wood in this house.

"There is a new *hety-a* now," a voice said. "You are dead. Your place is not here. The taxes you once received now go to another."

The *ka* of the child stood beside him.

"Go away," Amenemhet said. "Why do you bother me with things I know?"

THE FIRST CREDITOR CAME AT DAWN ON the third day. He was a grain trader from Thebes. Amenemhet had met the man only once. The man had stuck to *Rep-a* Djau's shoulder like a shadow to a wall. Amenemhet had disliked the man and refused to do business with him. That had angered *Rep-a* Djau.

"It grieves me to trouble you at such a sad time, *Nebet Per*," the trader said to Baketamen, "but your husband owed me money. The debt is long overdue. I would wait longer, but my farmers need payment."

Outraged, Amenemhet swept through the man. "I have done no business with you. You lie."

"You are mistaken," Baketamen said. "I keep the household accounts. I have no record of any debts unpaid. My husband told me of no contract with you."

The trader bowed his head and passed a rolled papyrus to her. She flattened it. Amenemhet peered past her. The bill of sale was clear. His seal had been pressed firmly onto the papyrus.

Hesitantly, Baketamen said, "It is a large sum."

"You see my dilemma, *Nebet Per*."

"I made no such contract," Amenemhet shouted. "The bill is false. *Rep-a* Djau must have stolen my seal when he murdered me."

Baketamen rolled the papyrus and returned it to the trader. "You will be paid."

The trader bowed deeper.

"How?" Amenemhet said, but none answered.

THEY CAME LIKE THE FLOW OF THE NILE, the creditors, each with his papyrus. With every payment, Baketamen's face became more drawn, her figure more bent. Her eyes grew desperate. She did not sleep.

At last, near the end of the second week, when the latest in the flow of creditors had gone, Baketamen dropped to her knees on a floor mat.

"Amenemhet," she wailed. "How could you?"

"But I didn't," he said.

She did not hear him.

"WE MUST SELL THE HOUSE," BAKETAMEN told her children. "That is the only way we can pay your father's debts. This is a good house. It will bring us enough."

"Where will we live?" Kawit asked, through tears.

"We will find a small place in the town. It will just be one room, but it will shelter us."

"We should go to *Rep-a* Djau," Meryt said. "He would give us rooms in his palace. He is kind."

Baketamen shook her head. "Your father would not like that. We still have our pride."

"Who cares about father?" Meryt shouted, little Meryt with the wide brown eyes and the thick black hair, his jewel. "This is all his fault. I hate him. I wish *Rep-a* Djau was our father."

She turned and ran from the room, passing through Amenemhet's stricken *ka*.

Amenemhet's anger lifted him like a feather in the wind from the north. Yet it seemed a distant anger, an anger drained of colour. His *ka* drifted through the town, across the rich fields, to the desert beyond and the tombs. For a while, he forgot his family and slipped only among the *ka*s by the tombs. They did not revolt him as they once had. He found comfort in their endless, repeated words of despair. Re *no longer travels the underworld at night. His face is but a ball of fire in the sky....*

Time passed, a scarce-noticed breeze.

One day, a golden chariot drew up before Amenemhet's tomb. A tall man in green and gold alighted. Disquiet grew in Amenemhet.

The tall man hitched up his robe and urinated onto Amenemhet's shrine, befouling the offerings left there.

Amenemhet howled. *Rep-a* Djau. Fury revived him, and his memories tore back. He chased the speeding chariot towards the town, throwing curses at the *rep-a*'s back.

Once in the town, he slowed. The streets here were narrow. The *rep-a*'s chariot could not move swiftly.

Amenemhet surveyed the crowds of the living. How bright they were. He became transfixed, and soon the chariot was gone.

Wading from one of the low buildings reached Amenemhet. He passed through the wall.

He did not recognize his family at first These people were strangers to him. They were dirty, bent, sun-darkened, and poorly dressed. Yet when Baketamen looked up, Amenemhet knew her

Beside her, Meryt and little Hori stood over their prostrate sister. Kawit moaned and twisted on the dirt floor Her skin was oily with sweat. She seemed very close to Amenemhet, as though her *ka* wished to slip from her body and begin the journey to the Land of Reeds

Baketamen brought a rag from a bucket and squeezed water over Kawit's hot skin The girl moaned in response

"Mother," Meryt said "Kawit is dying She will not last another day if we cannot bring a doctor."

"We have no money for a doctor," Baketamen said "It is all gone "

"*Rep-a* Djau has money," Meryt said. "He has his own doctor He would help us You know that."

Baketamen bent her head. Then she straightened. "You are right. We have waited too long. Help me with your sister We will go to the *rep-a*."

AMENEMHET FOLLOWED HIS FAMILY TO THE

rep-a's palace A guard let them through the massive external wall, while another hurried off to fetch servants Beyond the wall was a garden Date palms, pomegranate trees, sycamores, and acacias lined the winding paths. The roof of a pagoda jutted from the shrubbery to the left. Blossoming vines trailed over it Around the edge of the gardens, Amenemhet saw kitchens, workshops, stables, cattle sheds, and a wide granary

"I never could offer you this," he said, unheard. "Yet you loved me."

Servants arrived to carry Kawit on a litter Baketamen and other children followed a scribe through the gardens They passed a large rectangular pond from which grew lotus plants, papyrus reeds, and water lilies Amenemhet saw the thick brown bodies of fish slide through the water

The enormous house stood on a plinth at the end of the garden A colonnaded flight of stairs led up to a vestibule There *Rep-a* Djau stood, his smile as wide as the river Amenemhet saw the *rep-a* take Baketamen's arm Then a silent wind took his *ka* and bore it away

TIME PASSED. DUST SETTLED ON HIS EYES.

His *ka* grew gaunt and listless. He found himself drifting through the streets, dragged again and again to the crowds at the tombs He forgot his name and his purpose

"You're becoming like the rest of them," a small voice observed "You are fading Your *ka* will forget what it knew, and all you will be able to do is repeat the same words all the other *kas* repeat."

"Go away," he said. But there was no force to his words.

The *ka* of the child continued remorselessly "You will forget the map of the underworld You will forget the path to the Land of Reeds You will forget the words to speak at the gates."

"Go away *Re* no longer travels the underworld at night. His face is but a ball of fire in the sky. There are no demons anymore in the underworld, no *Apep*, no *Ammet*, no gates, no judges, no scales There is no Land of Reeds."

"Listen to yourself. You just repeat the words. Maybe *Amun-Re* is dead. Maybe *Re* no longer travels the underworld. That does not mean there is no Land of Reeds. You know the map, yet you will not follow the path."

"There is no path," he said

"If you help me, I will help you," the dead child said.

Amenemhet's *ka* drifted, caught by a dead wind

Time passed

SOMETHING WAS PULLING AT HIM. AMENEMHET

realized he was at the tombs *Ka*s pressed tight around him He could hear words coming from his mouth. "...are no demons anymore in the underworld, no *Apep*, no *Ammet*—" He cut off the words

The *ka* of the child stared up at him sadly "Your colors are almost gone You are near to forgetting."

"Then let me," Amenemhet whispered

"Your daughter is well She has recovered from the fever Your family now live in the house of your murderer He speaks of marriage to your wife. Perhaps ... perhaps soon your son will number among the dead. Your murderer resents that your blood flows in your son's veins Accidents are easy I know."

Already the words wanted to bubble from Amenemhet's lips. Re *no longer travels the underworld at night His face is but a ball of fire in the sky* Instead, he said, "Help me."

"Come, then," the *ka* of the child said. "I will take you to one who can speak with the dead."

THE CHILD LED HIM DOWN TOWARDS THE

river, where the poorest lived Sometimes, in the inundation, these rough houses were swept away by the river When living, Amenemhet had not come this way. The narrow streets stank of human waste

The hut the child took him to had partially collapsed in an inundation. One wall was gone The roof dipped towards the floor Amenemhet dipped so he could see within

"Come," the child said. "To the living, she is deaf and blind."

Amenemhet stepped into the dark

"I see you, oh dead," a voice said. "I smell your dust and I hear your pale breath."

Amenemhet bent towards the sound A crone sat huddled among rags

"Who are you?" he said.

"No one you would know, oh grand *bety-a*." She cackled "So grand to come so low."

"I was murdered," Amenemhet said. "*Rep-a* Djau slid a blade into my throat and left me to bleed to death. You must tell everyone They must know the truth."

The crone rocked back and cackled again "Who will listen to the words of an old woman against the word of the *rep-a*? They would throw stones at me."

Amenemhet fell to his knees. "I was always a loyal servant of Ptolemy Philopator. Once, he touched my hand."

"Go," she said. "The *kas* of the dead have no place with the living. Go to the Land of Reeds or go to fade. I do not care which You know the map of the underworld, and the child is a true child of *Re*. Between you, you can reopen the path once more."

"I do not know where the path begins," Amenemhet said

"It begins where it has always begun," the crone said. "It begins where life meets death, where they combine, and where life fails."

Amenemhet stood. "I will not go while the *rep-a* lives Justice must be done."

"Then fade," the crone said, "but bother my rest no more."

THE TOWN WAS FILLED WITH CELEBRATION.

Curious Amenemhet followed the crowds

Rep-a Djau's house was surrounded by flags. Amenemhet heard music within He passed through the wall. The child followed behind.

His wife stood on the top of the steps leading to the *rep-a*'s house. Beside her, *Rep-a* Djau stood, garbed in a wedding robe.

"He has married her," Amenemhet said. He swept forward, his *ka* buoyed by rage. He pummelled his fists through *Rep-a* Djau. They had no effect

He felt the dead wind try to lift him back towards the tombs

The *rep-a* bent towards Baketamen "Tonight," he said, "you are mine."

Amenemhet saw his wife shiver and a tear lay its trail down her cheek

Continued on page 86

By Eric T. Baker

A Playstation classic finds itself right at home on the PSP handheld platform.

MediEvil for the Sony PSP is a game originally released on the Playstation that has been buffed up and put out for the new handheld platform. which, the march of technology being what it is, has about the same technical specifications as the Playstation. It's a sensible approach to game making, it puts classics in the hands of a new generation of players at the same time that it gives fans a chance to rediscover their favorites

The appeal of *MediEvil*, then as now, is the story. Players take the role of Sir Daniel Fortesque, a knight who was anything but heroic in life. His life ended, in fact, in the final battle with the necromancer Zarok. Sir Daniel met his end without fanfare or distinction but in the aftermath of the victory, the king put out the story, which became history and legend, that it was Daniel who'd saved the kingdom. One hundred years later Zarok is back and again at his world-conquering ways. To recruit his undead army, Zarok casts a spell that raises just about everyone who has ever died, which includes Daniel. Now a skeleton, Daniel sets out to save the world for real this time

RIGHT Rediscover a classic with MediEvil. *BELOW* Kingdom Under Fire: Heroes *improves upon its predecessor with better gameplay and an online mode*

Story wise, *MediEvil* is still a great game. Both its main characters and its multitudinous undead foes shine in personality and look. What doesn't work as well is the game's camera and because of it, its combat system. The best advice for playing *MediEvil* is to avoid combat whenever possible, which is easily done on many levels because there is no collision programming and Daniel can run right through the enemies. Sometimes though, the player is required to clear a level of enemies. In these spots it is best to try to lure the enemy into a spot at right angles to Daniel and then use his best melee attack. There are some missile weapons in the game, but they're to be avoided.

A different game in a different genre in which players may have a similarly hard time targeting the enemies is ***Kingdom Under Fire: Heroes*** for the Xbox from Phantagram. This is the sequel to *KUF: Crusaders* that was released just a year ago. Happily, *KUF:H*, despite its short development cycle, is a better game than its predecessor with some minor fixes in the game play and an entire online mode added. Up to six players can now battle one another, as teams or free-for all, over Xbox live. On the down side, one thing

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Dragonshard or of Exalted Ice Age

missing from *KUF:H* is the true tutorial mission that *KUF C* had. Players who didn't learn the game's mechanics by playing *KUF C* have a fairly steep learning curve to climb.

Much of the learning curve in *KUF H* is the result of it being a hybrid game. It is, at the same time, a real-time strategy game and a first person action game. In practice, this means that players must master the mechanics of both moving army units about the maps and of fighting with the various heroes in the midst of the melee the army movements result in. Each half of the game depends on the other. To earn gold and to level both the heroes and the army units, the player has to be fighting as the hero. At the same time, the army units have to be commanded to take the right positions and to use their special attacks. Neither can be ignored in favor of the other.

The world of *KUF H* is a fantasy one with humans, vampires, orcs, and elves (both good and bad) warring on one another for reasons that don't really intrude on the playing of the game. It is possible that the story made more sense in the original Korean, but in English it is too simple and too poorly told to engage. The two game play modes, however, are very engaging. Particularly for a console game, the number of enemies and friends battling on the screen at any one time is really impressive. Once mastered, it is easy to switch between the play styles and so much is happening at once there is no way to become bored. As with *MediEvil*, though, there is no lock on to the targeting, so again a big part of the learning curve with the hero battles is being able to reliably hit the foes. The melee weapons have a wide arc and are pretty forgiving, but the missile weapons take a lot of practice.

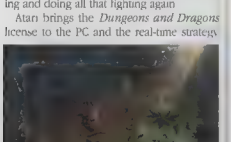
A game where there are no targeting issues is ***Shin Megami Tensei: Digital Devil Saga 2*** for the PS2 from Atlus. The first game told the story of the members of the Embryon tribe living in a brutal world called the Junkyard. The seven playable characters spent that game fighting to escape their world for the legendary land of Nirvana. In the end they succeeded, and *DDS2* starts with the characters partially scattered in Nirvana. Unfortunately for them, the promised land is nothing like the promise. If anything, it is worse. Humans are forced to live underground by the rays of a black sun, and they are hunted by the shape-shifting forces of the Karma Association.

In form, *DDS2* is a turn-based roleplaying game. The player moves one character around the map. When that character encounters a cut scene or (much, much, much) more often a fight, the game goes to a battle screen where three of the player's characters face off against however many foes. Each character attacks or defends in turn using either basic, advanced, magical, or combination attacks. The complication is that the number of actions the player gets on his turn is not fixed. It depends on the sorts of actions the characters take and what effect they have on the enemies. A well-strung together series of attacks can go on until the other side is completely knocked out.

The maps through which the characters travel in *DDS2* aren't very detailed, but the character designs are interesting. On the foes side, some favorites return from the first game and there are many new ones to learn and admire. This is a good thing because players

will be seeing a lot of the enemies. Even the smallest rooms in the game sometimes have two enemy encounters within them, and unlike some RPGs, this pace of fighting never lets up. Since the game can only be saved at certain points, it behooves players to level their characters as quickly as they can to make them as powerful as possible and reduce the likelihood of party wipe that requires restarting and doing all that fighting again.

Atari brings the *Dungeons and Dragons* license to the PC and the real-time strategy



Take control of your favorite superheroes in X-Men Legends 2: Rise of the Apocalypse

genre with ***Dragonsbard***. Set in the latest *D&D* world of *Eberron*, the game combines RTS game play above ground with RPG play below ground. There are parallels here to *MVP*, but *Dragonsbard* is much more traditional in its approach to targeting, unit movement, and combat. It is much less twitch-based targeting game, and more of a point, click, and scroll game.

Despite the presence of three different factions, only two are playable in the single-player version of *Dragonsbard*. Fortunately all three are available in the online mode when having human vs. human matches. In both single and multi-player, the game requires the gathering of dragonshards (which fall from the sky periodically) above ground and the gathering of gold below ground. Armies fight and do the gathering above ground. These armies seem as if straight from an RPG title.

No game of *Dragonsbard* has to be quite the same because of the tremendous variety of ways players can approach each campaign or each on-line match. One game might have a player leveling all his character classes equally, another might see them favoring one or two. Depending the opponent, either strategy or neither might be successful. One of the coolest utilities in the game allows players watch a replay of their just completed online game. It is very helpful to be able to see what actually happened in a game without the distraction of being in the middle of playing it.

The most surprising game this month is ***X-men Legends 2: Rise of Apocalypse*** from Activision for the PC, PS2, Xbox, PSP, and Gamecube. Surprising because licensed games about superheroes are so hit and miss. Surprising because it is so much better than the first one. Surprising because despite some

Continued on page 86

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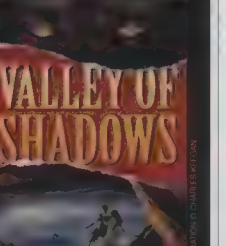

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Dead Letters

Continued from page 74

"Do you have references?" She lifted her chin a little, assessing. I said that I did, and handed her a list of names, phone numbers, addresses in New York City. I made up the zip codes and phone numbers. What does a New York City zip code look like? I am no better than Sarah.

Now I have meals with the Carrolls at noon and six o'clock in the evening. They have three children. Betsy, Peter Jr., and Bennie. Betsy is seventeen and last year's Corn Queen. Peter Jr. is fifteen and a 4-H member. Bennie, ten, continually asks me what it's like to be a girl. He's curious and Betsy will not tell him.

It is a strange dynamic, this being with other people. When Sarah and I were friends, we had no desire for contact with anyone but each other. Now I speak to twenty or thirty strangers each day, by the roadside, while I bag up a dozen ears of corn. They say hello, thank you, do I know you, how have things been going, that top is very flattering, how are the Carrolls treating you? The men call me blue eyes, sweetie pie, honeyface, miss, little miss, blondie. The women call me dear, dearie, sugar, they do not refer to my body.

I saw Sarah's mother two days ago, in Hoffman's grocery store, picking through the green peppers. I was shopping for the Carrolls, but as soon as I saw Mrs. Hartford I dashed into the soup aisle. I watched her shop for an hour, following behind so she wouldn't see me, ignoring my own shopping, so that I had to go back and finish after she'd gone. I couldn't bear to face her. How that woman hated me, though at first she'd thought me sweet and cute, would ask if I wanted anything, a cup of tea, some Kool-Aid. Then she went cold. I still don't know what I did to deserve such treatment. Sarah used to say it's because I didn't come from a good family. I said, "What? How could she think that? My mother—"

I stopped talking. I didn't know what to say, only that I wanted to defend myself. Sarah patted my shoulder to comfort me.

"Your mother is a sweet lady," said Sarah. She looked up at the ceiling, and her eyes rolled up as if she were thinking deeply. Finally she said, "She works at the factory, like my father. She loves you but is not home very often. My mother believes a woman should be at home with her children. Also, your father left when you were just a baby. He was a drinker. But I think you're better off without him."

"I *am* better off without him," I shouted. "And my mother works her fingers to the bone! Who does your mother think she is? Not everyone has the luxury to stay at home with her children."

"I know, Alice." Sarah said. She leaned in and hugged me. "I know. She doesn't matter. It's just you and me, OK?"

I've mailed Sarah the card I stole at Rexall's. I realized I'd never mentioned where she could find me. Did I feel stupid? Yes, indeed, I did. So I sent the card and wrote for her to meet me in the park in two days. I will give her another chance, and if she still chooses to not to see me, then maybe I *will* set out for California. Somewhere in the West, the Southwest even, where there is more space. Space enough to make a life out of nothing. I will be a pioneer of space, living off my wits and my good fortune. I will sit by the roadside and sell beaded necklaces while my skin turns tan and leathery. I will read people's fortunes in the palms of their hands for twenty dollars. People believe in things that aren't particularly believable. They wait all their lives for strangeness, for miracles.

I eagerly await our reunion.

Sarah,

I hope this card finds you well. Saw it and thought of you immediately. I have been hopelessly sending you letters, asking you to reply, and yet I never provided an address. I am red with embarrassment. Please meet me in the park, by the fountain, you remember, at noon tomorrow. I miss you dearly.

Always,
Alice

No word from Sarah. Neither did she show up at the park yesterday. Although I did see two police officers, strolling in the general area. I nodded and smiled when they looked at me, then sat on the park bench and took out a book that Betsy lent me.

The policemen approached. They took off their caps and asked what I was doing. Reading, I told them. They nodded. "Are you waiting for anyone?" they asked. I said that I was indeed waiting for someone. "Who would that be?" asked the taller officer. I was immediately suspicious, so I told them I was waiting for Betsy, that I worked for her family. They said, "In that case, we'll need you to wait for her outside the park, Miss."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing to concern yourself with. But you'd be doing us a favor if you read your book elsewhere." They put their hats back on and smiled. They waited for a while, badges glinting. Finally I stood to leave.

Why did she not meet me? My face is burning. I am so angry that I screamed at Bennie to leave me alone when I arrived back at the Carroll farm and he began pelting me with questions. I'll apologize later. For now I can only sit on my bed and cry. I wish my mother were still alive. Where is our house, though? I can't even remember what road we lived on. Was our front door blue or green?

Dear Sarah,

You said, "Alice, I have something to tell you." Do you remember? Does it hurt to be reminded? "You are not real, Alice," you said.

"You are not real. Do you hear me? I made you up, Alice. You are not a real person."

I hate you, Sarah Hartford. How could you be so filled with cruelty? But don't worry. I've given up on you. You won't hear from me again. I wish you only the best for the future.

Give Ron my regards.

Sincerely,
Alice Likely

I write this hastily, as I'm preparing to leave this town for good. It is home to me no longer. But now I wonder if it ever was. It was Sarah who I came home to in the morning, in the evening, and in the night. Now I know that she is in fact not receiving my letters. They have come between us in a way in which I never would have imagined them capable.

Yesterday, after the incident in the park with the police officers, I was lying in bed, crying, because I couldn't think of anything else more appropriate, when I became angry enough to write Sarah a hateful letter, a last letter. I was ready to give up, but only if I had a chance to give her a piece of my mind. This time I decided to do things differently. I planned on delivering my letter in person, and walked across town to the Hartford house on my own. I was through with dodging her mother, through with waiting. I had waited for so long in the darkness before someone called out my name, before the light came and freed me. Uncountable days, miserable, curled up in a fetal position. A fairy tale princess, like the ones in the stories Sarah used to read me. Waiting for someone to free them, their hands pressed against the lid of a glass coffin, struggling. Not again, I decided, and opened the front gate of the Hartford house and climbed the front porch steps and knocked on the door. Three sharp raps, and it opened.

It was her that answered. Mrs. Hartford. She stood there in a floral print housecoat with an apron tied around her waist. How small she was. I looked down on her. Looked down on her gray hair, stringy and unbound, spreading over her shoulders. Gray sacs of flesh sagged under her eyes. She wore no makeup. She wore no pearls. She looked up at me, not smiling, and said, "Can I help you?"

"I'm h-here—" I said, stuttering. As small as she was, she still frightened me. Her panty hose had rolled halfway down her legs, just below her kneecaps. I wanted to bend down, pull them up for her. Brush her hair into something respectable.

She chuckled. "You certainly are," said Mrs. Hartford. "What do you need, dear?"

"I'm here for her," I said. "I've come for Sarah. Where is she? Sarah!" I shouted beyond Mrs. Hartford's head, hoping she'd hear. "Sarah, where are you?"

"*You*," Mrs. Hartford whispered. Her mouth twitched wordlessly. "*You*," she said again, and then Mr. Hartford was behind her, his face a map of wrinkles, his hair salt and pepper. What had happened to that vigilante? The man who would save others who could not save themselves? Where was he now? He could not save anyone, could not save Sarah.

"What's going on here?" asked Mr. Hartford, his blue eyes moving back and forth between us, piercing. Mrs. Hartford reached up and slapped me. My cheek burned and then she was hitting me on my shoulders, my arms, my chest, her hands lashing out randomly. I pushed out, away from her, and she followed me down the porch steps.

Mr. Hartford grabbed hold of her shoulders and turned her around to face him. She buried her face in his chest, sobbing. Her chest heaved. He looked over her shoulder at me and shook his head as if I was his own child. As if I was his own, disappointing child. Is this how he sometimes looked at Sarah? Is this how they made her feel when she said she wanted to leave her husband?

"Please leave," said Mr. Hartford. "Or I'll call the police, Miss, and have you arrested. Don't come back, and stop writing those horrible letters. Go on, get out." He nodded toward the front gate.

I stepped backward slowly. Before I turned to go, I looked up at Sarah's old bedroom window. The lace curtains blew in the breeze. And behind them, I saw a face, the idea of a face, looking down at me.

I closed the gate behind me and ran away from the house, away from the sobbing.

Now I am writing this. It's early morning. I've gathered my clothes and some food from Mrs. Carroll. Before I left the kitchen she paid me for picking and selling the corn. She slipped me two fifty dollar bills along with what she owed, and told me to be safe. Her hands closed around mine and they felt scratchy and worn. I kissed her cheek.

I am off now, to space, to somewhere where there is more room for me. Somewhere in the West, or the Southwest even. I will sit in the desert below the blue bowl of sky until I become a part of that landscape. But not forever. I will move on, I will go farther. I will do the things for which she never had the courage to leave.

Dear Sarah,

I realize now that my words will not reach you. This is a dead letter. You will never receive it.

Still, I cannot help but write in the hopes that somewhere my words are finding you. And maybe wherever you are, you are writing me too. Long letters, beautiful letters. Letters that one day I will find and read with great pleasure. Perhaps you are having adventures elsewhere, now that you're not here. Perhaps you've moved on to a place that I will only understand as being better at some later juncture in this life, this life you gave me. But still, at some intersection, my hope is for our words to cross each other, so that we will feel, if only for a moment, infinitely loved and happy. It is the least anyone deserves.

Love,
Alice ❧

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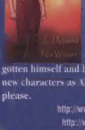

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Land of Reeds

Continued from page 79

He drew back. His *ka* grew cold.

The *ka* of the child gazed up at him, her face sad.

Amenemhet looked up at *Rep-a* Djau. "I know where the path begins," he said.

THE DEAD WERE EASY TO lead. Their kas had become grey. They had lost their will. They could only repeat words. Amenemhet became his own dead wind. He passed through them, drove them, tugged them. And he taught them new words to repeat.

Slowly, the *kas* began to drift from the tombs.

A cold wind passed through the town, and even the living moved aside.

It reached the walls of *Rep-a* Djau's palace and passed through them. The guests grew silent.

At the high table, *Rep-a* Djau stood, his forehead lining, his mouth growing tight.

The cold wind reached him. The dead reached him.

"Follow," Amenemhet said. Behind him, the dead whispered their new words.

Amenemhet flowed up into *Rep-a* Djau's heart. There the *ka* of the dead met *Rep-a* Djau's living *ka*.

Grey dust fell from Amenemhet's *ka* and drifted down onto the *rep-a*'s heart. Amenemhet's colors grew. Ahead of him, he saw the path.

The *ka* of the child came next. *Rep-a* Djau clutched his chest as the cold touched his heart.

Then the river of the dead swept through him.

Amenemhet saw the grey dust fall from their *kas*. As each of them passed through Djau, they spoke the words Amenemhet had taught them: "I am *Rep-a* Djau. I am a murderer and a liar. The gods judge me. I have murdered *bety-a* Amenemhet."

Rep-a Djau's lips twitched. Sweat sprang from his pale face.

Still the dead came. Still they spoke the words.

Rep-a Djau stiffened. His head tipped back and the words poured from him in a scream: "I am *Rep-a* Djau. I am a murderer and a liar. The gods judge me. I have murdered *bety-a* Amenemhet."

Then he fell.

The last *ka* to pass onto the path was the *ka* of *Rep-a* Djau.

Amenemhet took the hand of the child who had helped him. The map that showed the way was clear before him. The words to speak at the gates sat on his tongue.

"Come," he said. "Together we will find the Land of Reeds." ❧

Games

Continued from page 83

flaws in the gameplay, the action of *XL2* is extremely addictive. While it is best played *Gauntlet* style with four people at once, the game is still entertaining played solo.

A beautifully rendered, written, and paced cut scene starts the game and reveals that the X-men and the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants are working together this time. The threat posed by Apocalypse is so great than neither team stands a chance alone. This teaming up means that players have a choice of fifteen playable characters, plus three unlockable ones. The party in the game can have up to four. Each player can only control one character at a time, but players can switch the character they control on the fly.

Although the game is available on the PC, it was clearly intended for the console market to the point where it is very hard to control with a keyboard. On the other hand, the PC version loads the fastest, so a PC with a game controller attached may be the way to go, although the Xbox version is a good compromise between ease of control and load times. This is another game with limited saves and no lock-on aiming feature, so leveling and practice are important, although the pace of combat is less furious than *XUF* and less frequent than *DD2*.

The new James Bond game, ***From Russia with Love***, from Electronic Arts for the PS2, Xbox, and GC does, thankfully, have a lock-on aim mode. Hold down one button and a green ring appears around the closest enemy. Pull the trigger and Bond shoots at that enemy. If it sounds too mechanical, it actually comes as a relief after all of the timing and moving around and missing that happens in the other games. There is even a focus mode that lets players aim for specific parts of the target.

Although based on the classic book and movie, the story has been expanded and the ending slightly changed to better accommodate the needs of a video game to entertain for more than the two hours of a movie. Like a movie though, the game is linear, the player going from mission to mission, completing the objectives as they come up. The objectives can change as circumstances do, and the players can earn extra rewards by taking out foes in certain ways or by completing "Bond Moments." These Bond Moments are certain events in the game that can be completed with flair and cool.

The game is mostly shooting and fighting, but there are vehicle-driving levels as well. Players can earn upgrades to Bond's equipment and vehicles, so running straight through is not the way to go. There is no online play, but there is a split screen multiplayer mode. It is an interesting change of pace, but the real fun of the game is the single player and taking the chance to live adventure. ❧

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